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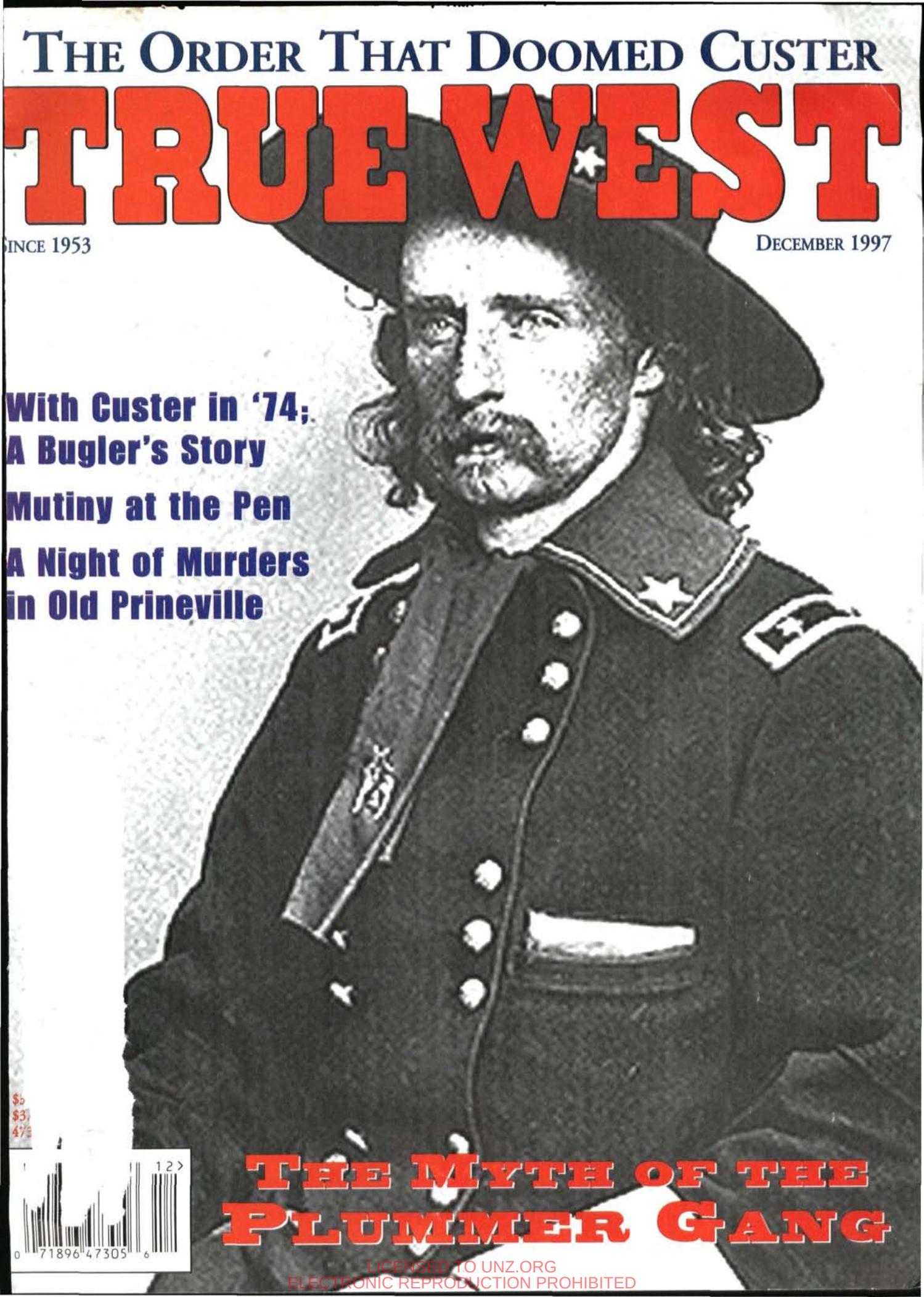

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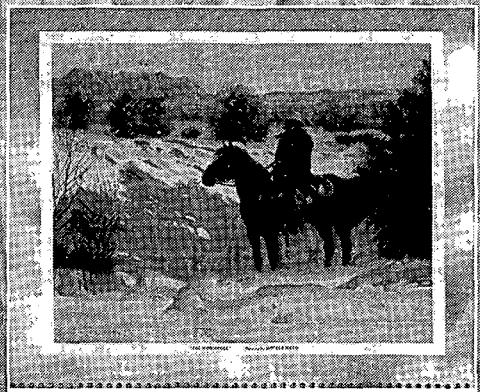

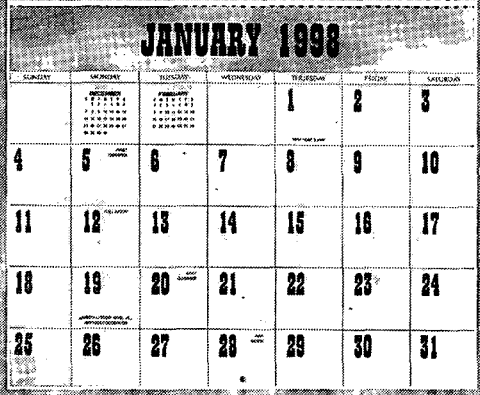

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George Armstrong Custer
Photo from the National Archives.

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FROM THE EDITOR

Howdy, ya'll!

Going through the mail pouch today I got an interesting letter from the folks at Southern Methodist University down there in Texas. Looks like they got some young folks together with some older folks to keep a fantastic slice of American entertainment alive.

Now, if you spent any time at all in front of the radio, or if you are a "youngster" like me and spent hours rummaging through your parents' record collection, chances are you've heard the twangy musical styling of the Light Crust Doughboys.

Taking a cue from country-swing pioneer Otto Gray, Bob Wills formed the Doughboys in Texas in the 1930s. The group honed their sound on live radio, taking their name from the flour company that sponsored their broadcasts. By the 1940s the group could be heard on more than 170 radio stations across the south. The Doughboys cranked out tunes like the "Doughboys' Theme Song #1," "Sugar Blues," and "That's All Brother, Sit Down," songs which are still played by the group today.

Bob Wills went on to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to form the Texas Playboys and shared the stage with the likes of Gene Autry. Other members of the Doughboys included Milton Brown of the Musical Brownies, a Texas radio fixture in the 1930s, and W. Lee O'Daniel.

The Light Crust Doughboys are still performing today, regarded as the longest continuously performing Western band in the nation. Proclaimed by the Texas legislature as "the official music ambassadors of the state of Texas," they are an official touring band for the Texas Commission on the Arts, and have been inducted into the Texas Western Swing Hall of Fame. Most surprising, to me at least, is the fact that one member, Marvin Montgomery, has played with the Doughboys for more than sixty-two years. That's a lot of pickin' and grinnin'.

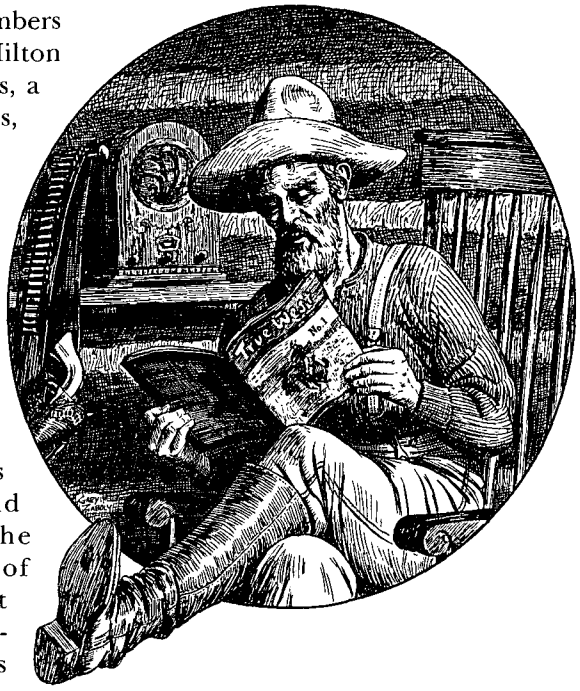
Now, what the folks at SMU have done is to combine the Doughboys with the school's student band to create a record that captures some of the greatest Western swing, plus some new tunes written by the Doughboys. The combination introduces great old music to a new generation of listeners, and gives the SMU band a chance to play Western swing, a style not usually studied in school.

SMU describes most of the songs on the album as "hand clapping" favorites and with some newer tunes like "Hangin' Round Deep Ellum" and "The High Road."

If you are interested in receiving the record, it is available from the Light Crust Doughboys Hall of Fame & Museum, 105 Broad St., Mesquite, Texas 75149.

With Christmas right around the corner, nothing would be finer than introducing some original country music to a whole new generation. "Ah, yes," as Bob Wills would say, "take it away, boys."

Marcus Huff



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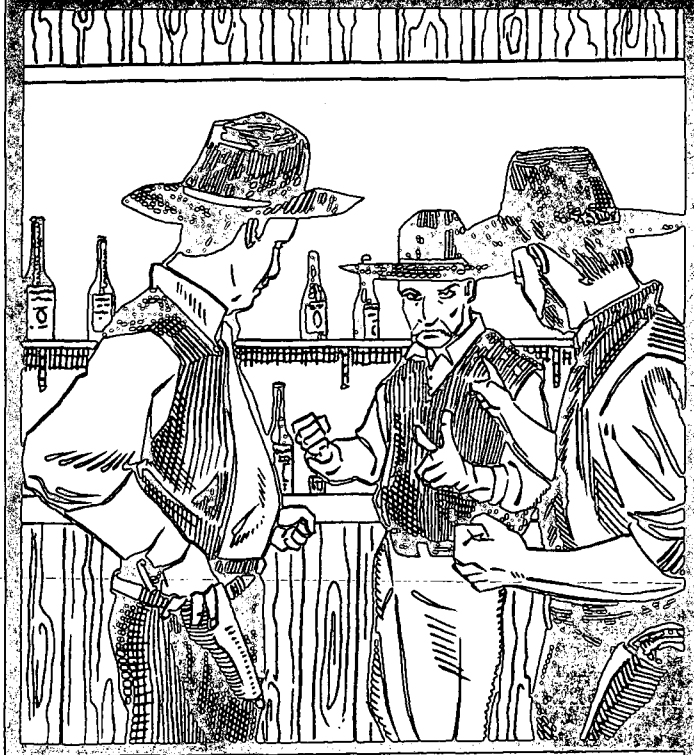
WEST SKETCH

BY ADAM WALLENTA

TURKEY CREEK SCORES TWO

WINTER 1876, DEADWOOD, DAKOTA TERRITORY—Turkey Creek Jack Johnson, one of many drawn to the gold fields of Deadwood, becomes involved in a bitter argument with his mining partners at a local watering hole. The trio take the yelling match to the town cemetery where Johnson is fired upon, and wounded, by the two men. As the men unload their revolvers at Johnson, the calm gunman walks toward his attackers, slowly closing the gap. Two well placed shots later, both men lay dead. Their burials are postponed until graves can be blasted in the frozen ground.



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I've been'a meanin' to send a scribbled word or two your direction for some time, but I reckon as to how creepin' age an' bein' durn slow of late has muddled the conjure. That muddled intellect became charged after receiving and inhaling the contents of *True West*'s October [1997] issue, "Strange Tales of the West."

I've got to hand it to you, Marcus, the whole she bangin' thing had a apparitional touch of Joe Small creepin' out of every article, including your "From the Editor" comments. Yes sir, I'd have to say you and the rest of the crew there at Western Publications have a landmark winner with that "Special Issue."—*Robert Walker, address withheld.*

Just want to congratulate you on the October issue of *True West.* I've been a subscriber for several years, and this was one of the most enjoyable issues, even compared to your usual excellence. I enjoyed each word and letter tremendously.

If anyone objects to these, just tell them that there is no law requiring historical articles to be dry. These were anything but, but still informative. Keep up the good work!—*George Bourbeau, Calhan, Colorado.*

Went Too Far

Mr. Huff, you have gone too far...I have never written a letter before although I have thought of it a few times in the past. I have just been reading the October issue of *True West* and frankly I'm astounded.

I have always considered myself a lover of the West and I always felt secure in the repeating of things I have read in your magazines as being as close to the truth and factual as possible.

Frankly, Mr. Huff, if your magazines are going to continue to carry ranting and ravings of the mind, such as ghost stories and such, I'm afraid I'll be forced to cancel my subscriptions to all three. If I want to read such gibberish as this I would subscribe to a publication of mysteries or stories of Poe.

In closing, Mr. Huff, as one of your western followers might say, "I'm afeared you're heading up a blind canyon."—*Richard Ashley, West Hickory, Pennsylvania.*

Documenting a Gunfight

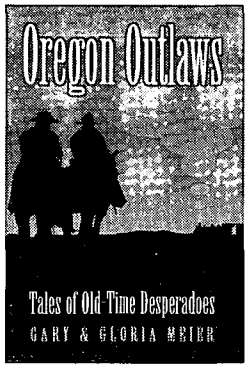
Concerning the article "Gunfire at Espantosa Lake" by Chuck Parsons in your October issue, Chuck needs to do his homework a little better. The article insert, "Documenting a Gunfight" mentions Sharps Repeating Rifles. Sharps never did market a repeating rifle, they were all single shots. I imagine you will get lots of mail on this. I will send mine anyway just for the record.—*C.E. Overlease, Laird, Colorado.*

Editor's Note: Just for the record, Chuck Parsons not only did his homework, but he also got an "A" in my grade book. The only mention of the Sharps being a "repeater rifle" is a direct quote by Texas Ranger George Durham. I believe Mr. Durham was probably referring to the simplicity of the cartridge system used by the Sharps, rather than a specific model as so easily interpreted.

Your letters and comments are welcome. Please keep letters to 300 words or less. All letters received by Western Publications will be considered for publication unless otherwise stipulated in the letter. Space does not permit us to print all letters we receive. Be sure to include full name, address, and zip code. Photos are welcome. Address all letters to Western Publications, PO Box 2107, Stillwater, OK 74076. E-mail us at, Western@cowboy.net. Due to the volume of mail, we cannot forward correspondence to people whose letters appear in "Truly Western."

GARY & GLORIA MEIER

Oregon Outlaws



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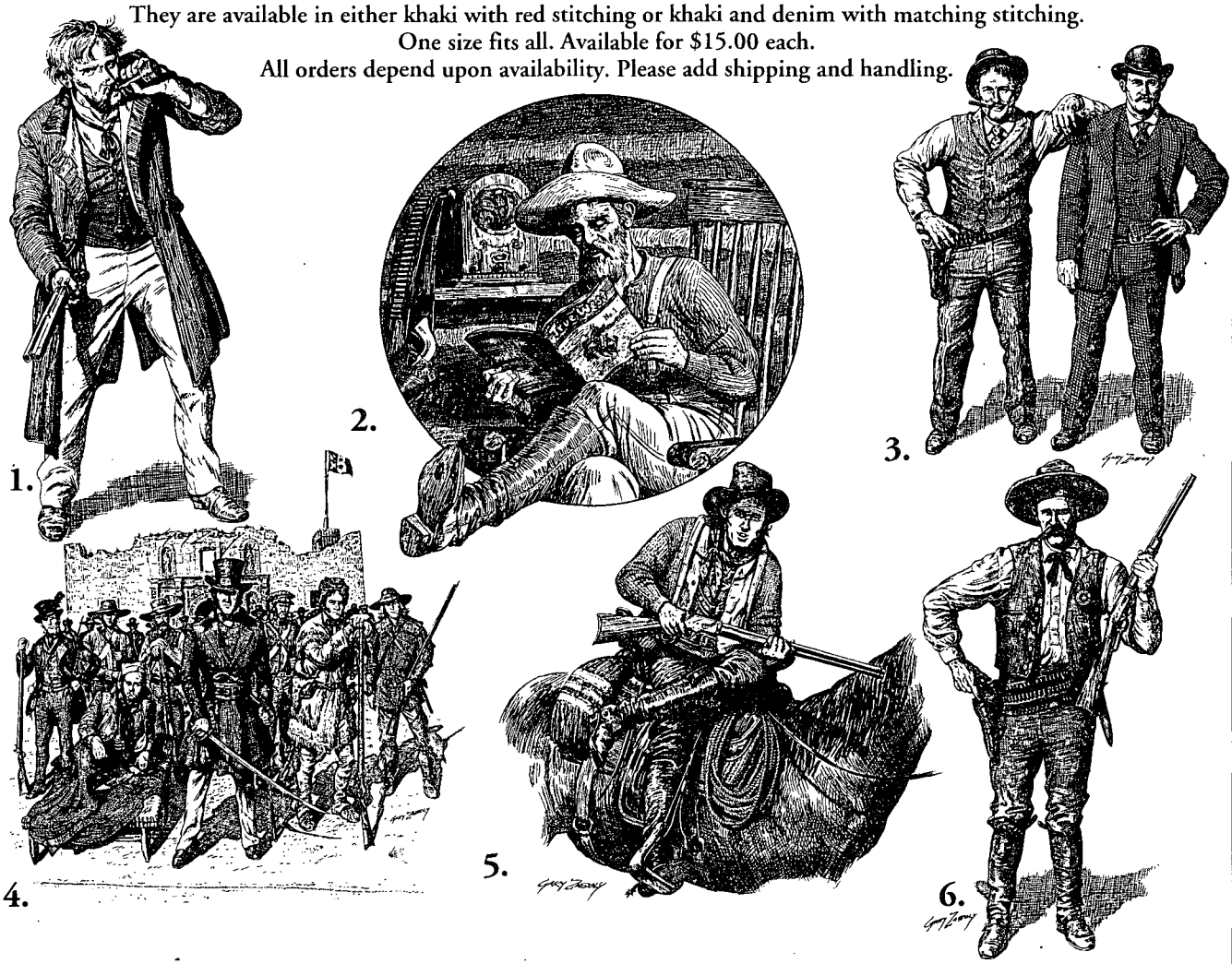

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Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park

By Johnny D. Boggs

It was, North West Mounted Police Superintendent Sam Steele said, "a little better than hell on earth."

From the summer of 1897 and through the winter of 1898, an army of "stampeders" turned Skagway, Alaska, into a lawless, rollicking town that served as a jumping off point for the arduous, 600-mile journey to the Klondike gold fields in Canada's Yukon Territory. They came by the thousands, swarming the homestead of former steamboat captain William Moore on the shores of Lynn Canal in southeastern Alaska.

"I have stumbled upon a few tough corners of the globe during my wanderings beyond the outposts of civilization," Alexander Macdonald wrote, "but I think the most outrageously lawless quarter I ever struck was Skagway."

People still flock to Skagway, but they come as tourists, not fortune hunters. Today the no-longer-lawless town celebrates at Klondike Gold National Park its part in what has been called "the last grand adventure."

The rush to Alaska, and on to the Yukon, began after gold was discovered on the Klondike River in 1896. When the steamer SS *Portland* docked in Seattle, Washington, on July 17, 1897, carrying sixty-eight miners and $700,000 in gold from the Klondike—only days after a steamship arrived in San Francisco carrying more than $500,000 in Klondike gold—a nation still smarting from the Panic of 1893 became captivated by dreams of gold, even though the best claims on the Klondike had already been staked out.

"GOLD! GOLD! GOLD! GOLD!" the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* headline screamed, and reporter Beriah Brown's story exaggerated: "At 3 o'clock this morning the steamer *Portland*...passed up the Sound with more than a ton of solid gold aboard."

The rush was on. Americans were joined by Canadians, Europeans, Australians, Japanese, and would-be adventurers and fortune hunters from all over the world.

By the summer of 1898, 15,000 people were in Skagway(sometimes spelled Skaguay), named after the Tlingit Indian word *Skagua*, which means "windy place." William Moore had been pushed aside by thousands of prospectors, unable to stop them from jumping his claim.

Today, Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Park includes seven blocks along Broadway Street in downtown Skagway that showcase many restored buildings, some used as businesses and others displaying artifacts and exhibits.

A south unit of the park is located in Seattle, which details the outfitting and transportation story of the gold rush.

The best starting point at Skagway is the park's visitor center in the White Pass and Yukon Route Railroad Depot, circa 1898, at Second and Broadway. The depot houses photos and exhibits, and films, talks, and walking tours are offered daily during the summer.

Construction of the railroad began on May 28, 1898, to connect the Skagway harbor to the Yukon.

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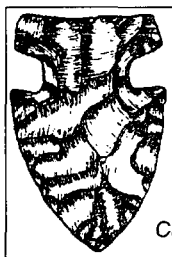
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Author's photo
Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park includes seven blocks of restored buildings in downtown Skagway, Alaska.

Despite long odds, the railroad reached the White Pass summit on February 18, 1899, and Lake Bennett five months later. At Carcross, Yukon Territory, on July 29, 1900, the WP&YR crew met workers laying track from Whitehorse, and the railroad was completed.

The White Pass & Yukon Route offers a railroad excursion twice daily during the summer season to White Pass Summit, just over the border in British Columbia. Today, the excursion trains climb from sea level to more than 2,800 feet, taking tourists across wooden trestles and through tunnels as they soak up breathtaking mountain scenery and a lot of Gold Rush history.

The trains travel past the dark and eerie Gold Rush Cemetery on the outskirts of town; Black Cross Rock, where two railroad workers were buried under a 100-ton granite rock during a blasting accident on August 3, 1898; and other sites, including the well-known Dead Horse Gulch.

The Dyea town site is located nine miles north of Skagway off an unpaved road. Scattered ruins and the Slide Cemetery, the final resting place of sixty victims of an 1898 avalanche on the Chilkoot Trail, are all that remain.

In Skagway, the Mascot Saloon at Third and Broadway, circa 1898, features exhibits of city life in Skagway. The Arctic Brotherhood Hall, between Second and Third, circa 1899, houses the Trail of 1898 Skagway Museum. A false-front mosaic, made up of more than 20,000 pieces of driftwood, has made the museum one of the most photographed buildings in Alaska.

Jeff Smith's Parlor, between State and Broadway on Second Street, circa 1897, is closed but is worth a look. Smith was Skagway's most notorious citizen.

Jefferson Randolph "Soapy" Smith led a gang of con artists that suckered and robbed miners, yet the Georgia-born cowboy-turned-con man was liked by some journalists and today is regarded by many as a folk hero.

A bunko man, Smith earned his nickname in Colorado when he sold cakes of shaving soap to unsuspecting gents who thought fifty dollar bills were hidden underneath the wrappers. In Seattle in 1897, Smith told a companion, "I'm going to be the boss of Skagway," and he lived up to his word.

By the spring of 1898, he oversaw some two or three hundred con artists. One of his best cons involved his telegraph office, where for five dollars, ignorant stampeders could send a wire to their loved ones or partners back home and would get a reply—usually collect—within three hours.

The beauty of the con was that Skagway had no telegraph line.

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On July 8, 1898, while acting as a town marshal, the usually cool Smith was reportedly half-drunk and fuming when he walked to the dock to break up a meeting of the town's vigilante committee. Smith ran into Frank Reid, the city engineer. After a heated exchange, Smith and Reid shot each other. "Soapy" died from a bullet in his heart, while Reid succumbed twelve days later in Bishop Rowe Hospital after being shot in the groin.

"Soapy Smith is dead!" *The Skaguay News* reported on July 8. "Shot through the heart, his cold body lies on a slab at People's undertaking parlors, and the confidence men and bunco steerers which have had their headquarters here for some time, have suddenly taken their departure, the tragic death of their leader having completely unnerved them."

Author's photo

The Arctic Brotherhood Hall houses the Trail of '98 Skagway Museum.

Smith and Reid are buried in the pioneer cemetery, about two miles from the historic downtown. A monument at Reid's grave declares: "He gave his life for the Honor of Skagway."

Other restored buildings include Captain Moore's log cabin, circa 1887. Skagway's first house, the cabin was among the first to be restored by the National Park Service. It was dedicated on July 4, 1987.

McCabe College, a granite building, circa 1899, originally built to house a women's college, and the Golden North Hotel, circa 1904, which claims to be Alaska's oldest operating hotel, have also been restored, along with other buildings and businesses originally built between 1897 and 1908.

The Klondike stampede was over by the summer of 1899, when news of a gold strike in Nome sent fortune hunters racing to the Alaska coast on the Bering Sea.

"Skagway has become a quiet port of a few hundred people," historian Pierre Berton writes, "living on its memories."

Those memories, however, come alive at Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, which was dedicated on June 4, 1977. Sites in Skagway continue to be restored by the National Park Service. When cruise ships deposit thousands of tourists upon the town, one can get a feel for what it was like during the gold rush.

For information on Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park's Skagway unit, write P.O. Box 517, Skagway, Alaska, 99840-0517. The phone number is (907) 983-2921. For information on the Seattle unit, write 117 S. Main St., Seattle, Washington, 98104-2540. The phone number is (206) 553-7220.

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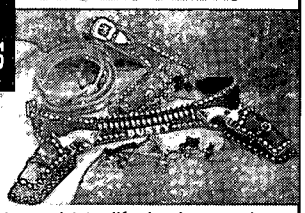
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THE ORDER THAT DOOMED CUSTER

BY BRAD PROWSE

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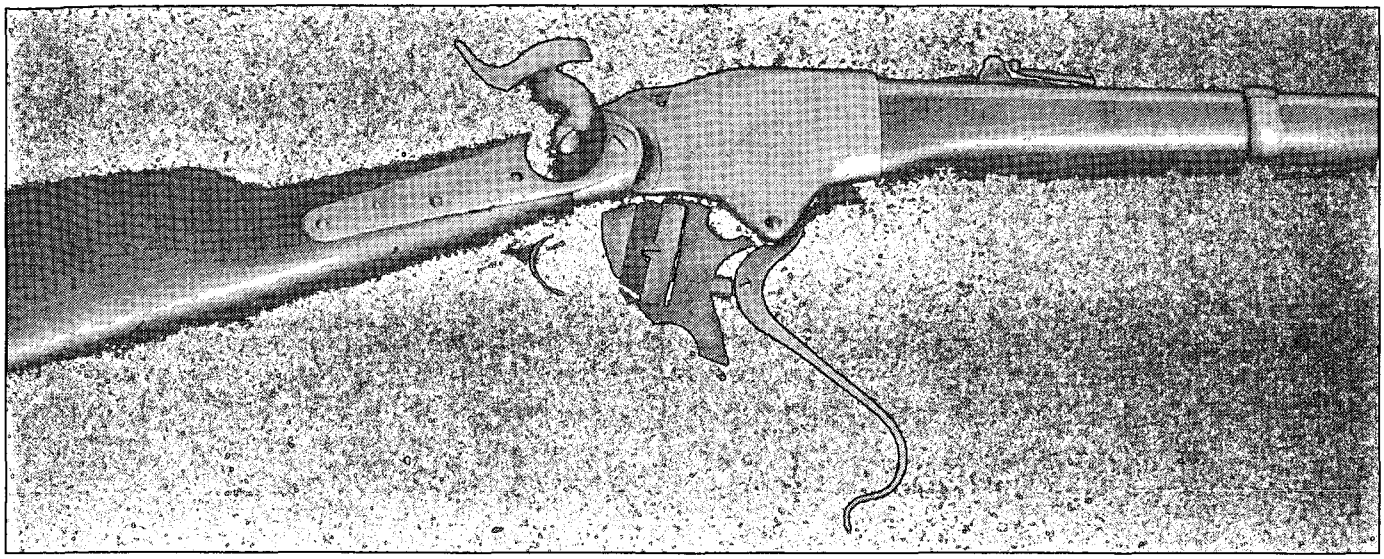


Author's photo

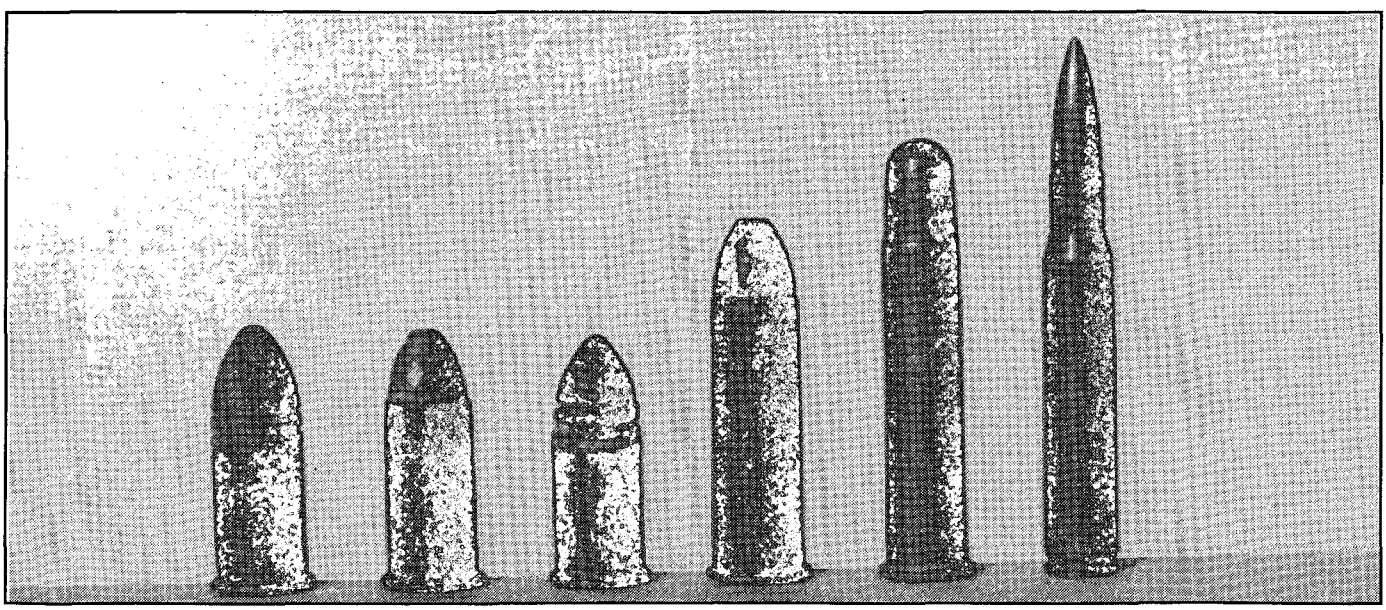
Spencer carbine with action opened.

This is a story about two rifles and one big *if*. But to address the *if*, we need to outline the two rifles, carbines, actually; the Spencer and the Model of 1873 Springfield, also called the Trapdoor Springfield.

The Spencer, like its contemporary, the Henry, was pretty much fully perfected by the eve of the Civil War, though the conflict acted as a forced-draft to its acceptance. Unlike the Henry, the Spencer was not derived from an earlier, less refined design—the Volcanic—that just needed a touch of genius to make it a successful firearm. In the case of shirt-maker turned arms-maker Oliver Winchester, it was B. Tyler Henry who supplied the genius that turned the Volcanic into the Henry, and, after the war, the Winchester.

Christopher M. Spencer, was the sole inspiration behind the rifle that bears his name. Born on a farm in Connecticut, Spencer descended from patriotic stock. His grandfather had fought at Brandywine and Valley Forge, among other Revolutionary battles. At fourteen, Christopher was apprenticed to a silk mill. He exhibited considerable mechanical ability and by 1859 had worked as an engineer for several manufacturing concerns (among them, Colt) and held a number of patents. In 1857 he began work on the rifle that would bear his name.

In a world still largely wedded to the muzzleloader, the Spencer stood out because it was breech-loading repeater, firing fixed ammunition. Dropped into an opening in the buttplate, seven cartridges, forced forward by a spring-loaded tube, were fed individually into the rifle's chamber by each stroke of the lever—which also



Author's photo

Various ammunition, left to right: .56-56, used in Civil War era weapons; .56-50, used by the army post-Civil War; .56-52, civilian round; .50-70 and .45-70-500, used in the Springfield Trapdoor, and the modern .30-06.

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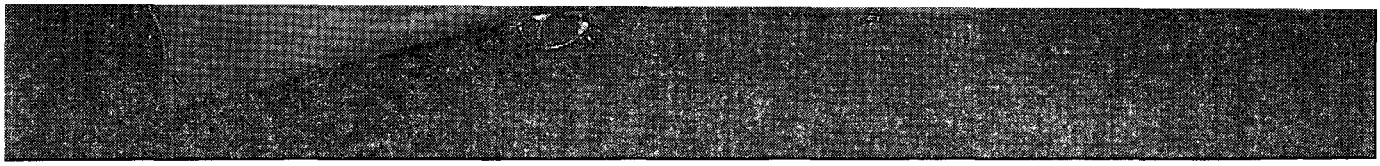


Author's photo

1873 Trapdoor Springfield carbine.

extracted any shell then in the chamber. The large, side-mounted hammer was manually cocked by the rifleman for each shot.

The Spencer could roll out seven aimed shots in a minute, about the same time it would take a man with a muzzleloading musket to get off two shots. Later, with the Blakeslee Quickloader, a quiver that held a number of pre-filled tubes of ammunition, loading the Spencer was even faster.

Early in the war, Spencer received an order for 10,000 rifles. They proved so popular in battle that before the war was over almost 100,000 Spencers, most of them carbines, would be ordered by the government.

It's reported that President Lincoln took an interest in the Spencer. On an August day in 1863, Lincoln, his secretary, John Hay, and Spencer himself, retired to a portion of the capital grounds near where the Washington Monument is today, and indulged in a little impromptu rifle shooting. Hay records that "the President made some pretty good shots" while Spencer did some "splendid" shooting. Being an outdoorsman in his early years, it's likely Lincoln was a good shot, though, considering Hay's position, he probably wouldn't have said much different even if the President couldn't hit the ground with his stovepipe hat.

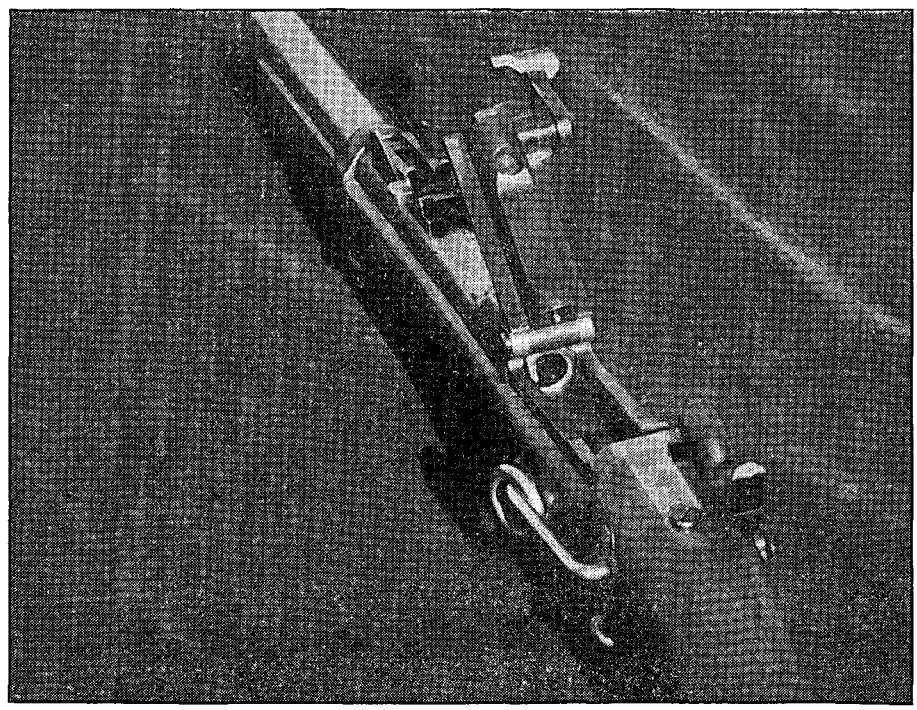
The Confederates reportedly called the Henry the "rifle you loaded on Sunday and shot all week." The Spencer probably should be included in that saying, too. Only 1,700-odd Henrys were procured by the government while around 100,000 Spencers were accepted for military use. However, some private purchases of Henrys were made to equip volunteer troops.

In a way, the Trapdoor Springfield was also a product of the war. At the conflict's end all but the most hidebound cap-ball-and-loose-powder officers could see the need for a breechloader. But the war had left the government coffers nearly empty and the armories full of stands of perfectly good rifles, Union and Confederate, albeit muzzleloaders.

Erskine Allin, master armorer at Springfield Armory, came up with a way to use the muzzleloaders and still get a breechloader at bargain prices. He developed a breech that could be fitted to the old muskets after cutting off the rear of their barrels. The Allin breech consisted of a block of steel with its center hollowed out, though still closed at its rearmost portion. This breech was then screwed to the rear of the cut-down muzzleloader barrel.

There was a breechblock—the trapdoor—hinged over the barrel chamber. A cartridge was slipped into the trough in the breechblock, pushed forward into the chambered barrel and the trapdoor shut, it's forward face resting against the cartridge. A long firing pin through the length of the breechblock was driven by the modified hammer of the former muzzleloader.

The Trapdoor would soldier on until the Krag-Jorgensen was adopted in the 1890s. But Trapdoors were used by volunteers in the war with Spain in 1898, and up to the early 1940s some were reported still stored by the government. It



Author's photo

1873 Trapdoor Springfield carbine with action opened.

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gives one pause to imagine a scene where Japanese and German troops charged into the muzzles of those old smokepoles.

The Spencer carbine was not without problems. It was expensive to manufacture and fired a relatively weak round, the 56-56. (Actually .52 caliber—the 56-56 referred to its case dimensions, indicating the sides were straight). The 56-56 cartridge held forty-two grains of black powder, pushing along a bullet of around 380 grains at 900 feet per second with 800 pounds of muzzle energy. This is less than a modern-day .44 magnum fired from a revolver, although a half-inch lead ball in your posterior would still get your attention.

After the war the army adopted a .50 caliber cartridge for the Spencer, the 56-52, and a commercial version, the 56-50 also appeared. These last two, actually both .50 caliber, were interchangeable. Their designations indicated they were slightly bottlenecked or tapered.

The Springfield Carbine Model of 1873 fired the much more powerful 45-70 cartridge with a 405 grain bullet weight. It proved too powerful. It kicked so hard the carbine round was reduced to 55 grains of powder. And in the 1880s, a 500-grain bullet was adopted for the rifle.

The Spencer also didn't do as well against the Trapdoor in tests that involved placing sand in the action and subjecting the rifle to corrosive fluids. Insofar as the average soldier didn't pour sand into his rifle or dump corrosive fluids over it, he likely would have preferred to keep the Spencer and clean his rifle a little more carefully. But officers never ask soldiers.

However, the Trapdoor Springfield had its own problems. Besides being a single shot in a world rapidly adapting repeaters, the extractor had a habit of tearing the heads off the soft, copper shells then in use, leaving the rest of the case in the barrel. This was most likely to happen when the gun was hot and fouled with powder residue—like when hostiles were shooting at you, possibly with '66 or '73 Winchesters.

At this point, the Trapdoor became a club until the soldier could take the time to pry out the shell. Some years later the army developed an extractor to remove the headless shell.

Just the same, an army board, charged with selecting a new rifle and carbine, chose the Trapdoor Springfield, suggesting that the caliber be reduced to .45 of an inch from the than official caliber, the 50-70. The proceedings of the board were approved on May 20, 1873, and the order went out to call in all the repeaters and other breechloaders in the hands of troops. By the end of the second quarter of 1874, the Seventh Cavalry was being issued the new Trapdoor carbines to replace their Spencer carbines. By September, all companies of the Seventh Cavalry had 45-70 Springfields. The order had been obeyed.

Now for the big *if*. What *if* Custer's command had been armed with Spencers that June day in 1876 on the Little Bighorn? Without fighting the damn battle all over again—and even then we'd be missing the daring and chutzpa of Custer and the brilliance of Crazy Horse—all we can do is guess. But there are hints of what might have happened.

In September 1868, Major George Forsyth and fifty men were riding near the Arikaree River in eastern Colorado. Forsyth had a theory about fighting Indians. He believed they could best be defeated if one fought them as they fought. To that end he gathered a volunteer force of experienced frontiersmen, all well-armed, traveling light, and on the prod for a fight.

Each man carried a Spencer carbine and 140 rounds of ammunition with 4,000 more rounds in the pack train. On September 17, ten days out of Fort Wallace, Kansas, he ran into the hostiles he'd been looking for—a force of almost 1,000 Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and Sioux. Forsyth immediately moved his little command to a small island about sixty yards long by twenty yards wide in the middle of the Arikaree River. Here they dug in and waited for the inevitable charge.

And they came, several of them, but the fire from the Spencers broke each charge as it came. Finally, Chief Roman Nose led a charge. This one was also broken, and Roman Nose was carried away, dead. From then on, the Indians pretty much abandoned frontal attacks but kept the soldiers pinned down for over a week until troops from Fort Wallace lifted the siege. Forsyth lost seven men including Lieutenant Frederick Beecher, who gave his name to the island. The Indian estimate of dead was around seventy-five.

In 1868, Custer had Spencers at the Battle of the Washita where he attacked a Cheyenne camp. He was initially victorious until warriors from other nearby camps joined the fray and Custer was forced to retreat. Still, under the fire of his Spencers, he left in good order, although a contingent of about twenty men under Major Joel Elliott, who were separated from the main body of Custer's troops, might not have thought so. They were wiped out.

There were differences between the Beecher Island battle and the Little Bighorn. Forsyth had around fifty men, the Indians an estimated 1,000. Custer's command of 600 was pitted against 1500 to 3000 Indians, at worse, a six-to-one disadvantage. But Forsyth's command fought from one unified defensive position. Custer split his command before going into the fight and those who were to die with him were scattered over a large area—either due to orders given, or by being driven apart by the enemy.

Forsyth's men were veterans. Custer had many recruits. But Custer had veterans too, and these men, with Spencers in hand, are likely to have put up a much different fight than they did.

In 1868, the Indians fighting Forsyth probably had few experiences against breechloaders—and perhaps none against repeaters, they were so new to the West. But

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Author's photo

The Spencer carbine.

they learned fast. The massed charges that worked against slow-to-load muzzleloaders were suicide against cartridge arms. The Indians learned not to charge en masse and did the best they could to obtain breechloaders of their own, and repeaters as well. It has been estimated that around 10 percent of the Indians that engaged Custer had repeating rifles.

The Sioux and Cheyennes facing Custer were highly motivated, seeing as their families and village were right at hand. They were fighting against annihilation. The warriors fighting Forsyth at Beecher Island had their families at some remove, twelve or so miles away. They fought because they wanted to. They did the actual attacking.

So, what reasonably might have happened if Custer had Spencers? For one thing, Major Marcus A. Reno, making his initial charge toward the camp, may have been able to remain on the flats longer. He might even have been able to charge into the village, as it seems Custer may have expected him to do, but that probably wouldn't have happened in any case, as untried at Indian fighting as Reno was. But the Spencers should have allowed him to fall back to the rear slowly and maintain that position longer instead of retreating in panic to the bluffs above the river.

From the cover of the timber with Spencers, he may have been able to hold until Custer came swooping down off the bluffs to his right, hitting the village hard and perhaps drawing off some of the Indians around Reno or even joining up with Reno to make a determined stand, until the ammunition packs arrived.

Though driven to the bluffs as he was, with Spencers, Reno should have been able to make his position secure against direct charges by the Indians. He might have even been able to tie up enough Indians to keep them from confronting Custer with as many warriors as they did. Indian accounts mention that they felt safe in leaving Reno where he was to go take on Custer's full force. If Reno had been putting up an aggressive fight with Spencers, the Indians may not have been free to do so. And with Reno putting up a good defense, when Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Benteen and the packtrain showed up they may have felt free to follow on in the direction Custer's trail showed he had gone.

Indian accounts agree that Custer was wiped out in a half hour to an hour. When Lieutenant Weir and his men rode forward past Reno's position on the bluffs, all he saw in the direction of the Custer battlefield were Indians, riding around, shooting at things on the ground. It was already too late. And since Reno felt his position was precarious, and Indians were already riding to meet Weir as he looked toward the Custer battlefield, he and Benteen, and the other troops that joined Reno after his flight to the bluffs, decided to stay and help.

But *if* Custer had Spencers, it's likely they would have been carrying more ammunition per soldier, and they probably could have held out long enough for Weir and Benteen to see their desperate struggle from Weir Point, several miles away. With their own Spencers—and those of Reno, if he was willing to ride to Custer's rescue—the command should have been able to fight its way to Custer. With Reno's command and the pack trains, Custer would have had about 600 men armed with Spencers. He also would have had the Spencer ammunition the packtrain carried.

Six hundred men armed with repeaters should have been able to hold out while the Indians hurriedly packed up and moved away. In fact, a commander as pugnacious as Custer might have even tried to go on the offensive again. Three to one or, at worse, six to one in favor of the Indians should have largely been offset by the firepower of the Spencers.

And *if* the decision of an army board, three years before, had not resulted in an order for the mounted service to give up its Spencer carbines, Custer may not have died on June 25, 1876.

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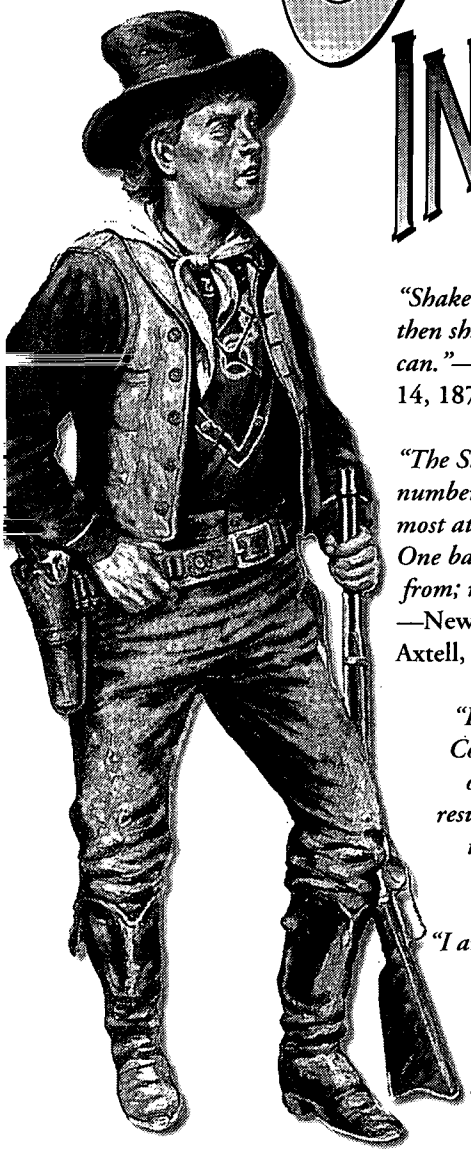
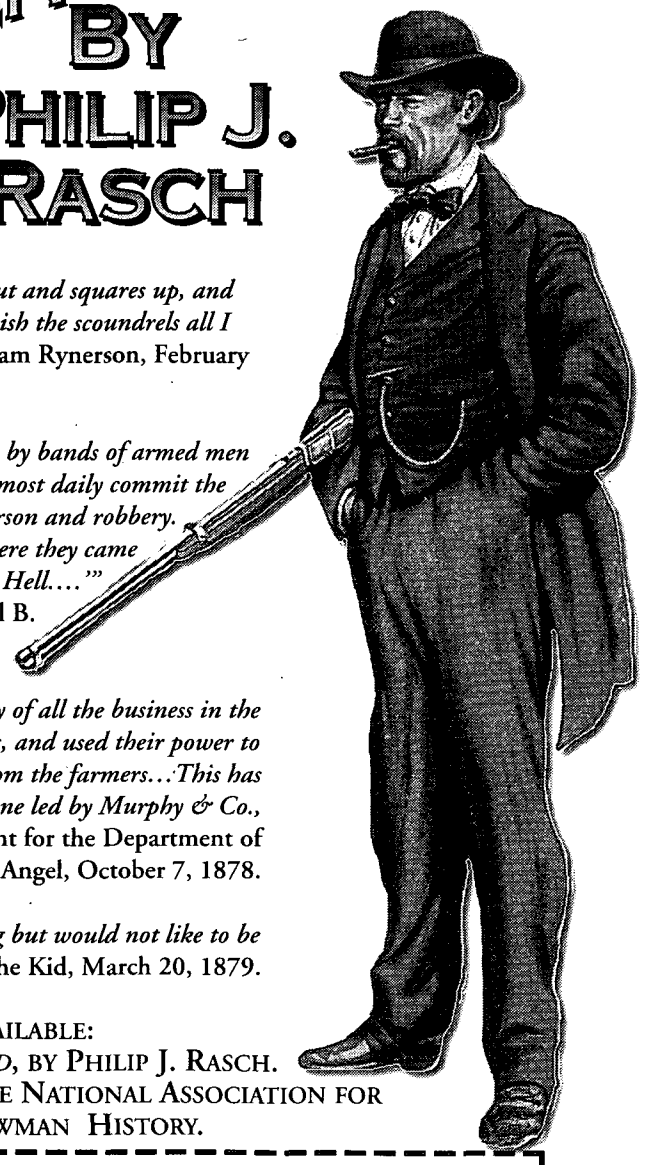
GUNSMOKE IN LINCOLN COUNTY

BY PHILIP J. RASCH





"Shake that McSween outfit up till it shells out and squares up, and then shake it out of Lincoln. I will aid to punish the scoundrels all I can."—New Mexico District Attorney William Rynerson, February 14, 1878.

"The S.E. portion of the Territory is over run by bands of armed men numbering in all about two hundred, who almost daily commit the most atrocius crimes, such as murder, rape, arson and robbery. One band when asked who they were and where they came from; replied, 'We are Devils just come from Hell....'"
—New Mexico Territorial Governor Samuel B. Axtell, August 20, 1878.

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"I am not afraid to die like a man fighting but would not like to be killed like a dog unarmed."—Billy the Kid, March 20, 1879.

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WITH CUSTER IN '74: A BUGLER'S STORY

BY PETER HILDEBRANDT

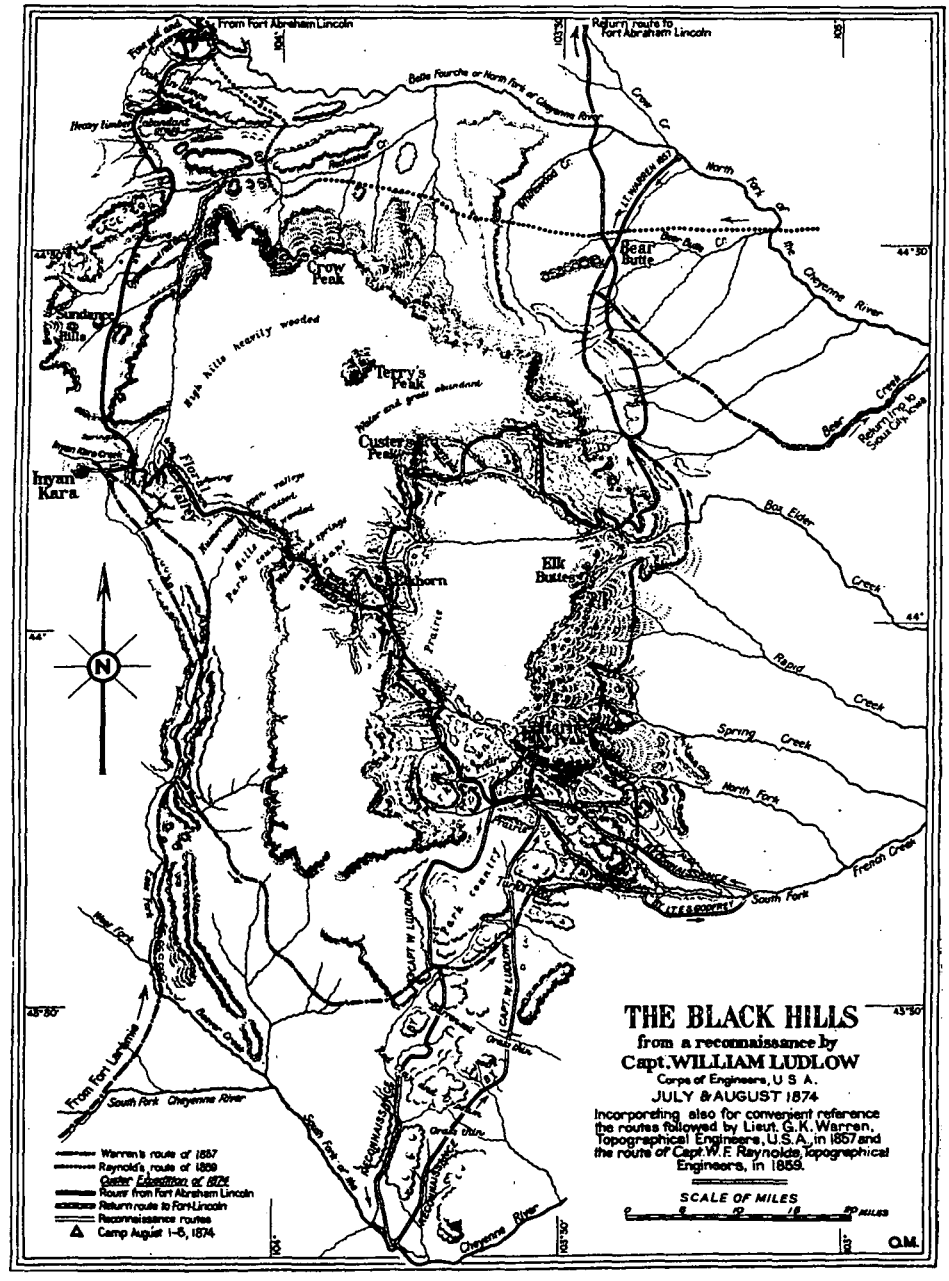
From July 2 to August 30, 1874, General George A. Custer engaged ten companies of his Seventh Cavalry, along with several other military companies, in an expedition to the Black Hills. Along with one Rodman and three Gatling guns and thirty-nine Arikara, seven Sioux, and twenty-nine Santee scouts, the large party included a young bugler. Though Custer surely never noted much of Private Theodore Ewert's presence, the bugler kept a diary and Custer's name is splashed throughout the journal's pages.

Theodore Ewert felt few restraints in revealing his feelings. The events of those weeks as recorded in his journal paint a vivid picture of the expedition and its leaders, especially Custer.

At 8:00 AM on July 2, 1874, the companies marched out, flags flapping in the breeze, the band playing "Gerry Owen," while officers rode up and down the column with an air of importance. The men were cheerful and full of chatter as they cast their eyes one last time on Fort Abraham Lincoln up the valley. Wives waved scarves or handkerchiefs in sad farewell.

The moment stuck with Ewert. It stirred his imagination about these remaining "widows-in-waiting":

"She looks upon him perhaps for the last time on this earth. She imagines all sorts of mishaps, sees him a prisoner in Sioux camp, sees him again preparing for torture, then under the hands of the devilish squaws, tied to tree, the boys throwing knives and hatchets at him for practice and finally sees him fastened to a stake, flames leaping along his limbs, drying, scorching,


From Fort Abraham Lincoln
Return route to Fort Abraham Lincoln
Bear Butte
Crow Peak
Sundance Hills
Terry's Peak
Custer's Peak
Inyan Kara
Elk Butte
Elkhorn
Prairie
Cheyenne River
Bear Creek
Box Elder Creek
Rapid Creek
Spring Creek
North Fork
French Creek
South Fork
Bear Butte Cr.
Crow Cr.
Belle Fourche or North Fork of Cheyenne River
Heavy timber
High Hills heavily wooded
Flat Valley
Hills Park
Prairie
Prairie country
Rocky Buttes
Rocky Ridge
Rocky Ridge
Rocky Ridge

burning the husband by inches. She shrieks aloud in her agony at such a parting. Such is a soldier's parting on the frontier."

On the first day they set out over well-known ground and covered fifteen miles. Reveille was established at 2:00 AM. Some days' marches went to unusually late hours after dark. After men took care of their horses, got supper, and waited on the officers, they finally managed to roll themselves into their blankets. Just two hours later they heard the bugle calling them to seemingly endless hours of duty.

Independence Day brought them to an old trail made the year before on another expedition, to the Yellowstone. That memory filled many with questions about this trip. Would the country surpass in beauty that of the Yellowstone, to which they had traveled in 1873? Would more natives come their way? How many men would return? The questions kept the troopers talking into the night.

On July 5, a teamster fell from his wagon while driving his team over a rough creek. The wheels drove over his leg, breaking it in two places. Doctors set it on the spot, and miraculously he came through fine. Doctors, as Ewert would soon explain, seldom had this much luck.

Over the next week a routine of travel set in with monotony and extreme heat. Perhaps this lack of excitement led to something Ewert noticed about the rules for naming landforms.

"It is remarkable what a tendency towards high sounding and exaggerated names the first explorers of this territory had. Every brook or creek, be it ever so small and insignificant, is christened a river, every mud puddle is dubbed a creek. Now what we found marked on our maps as 'The Caves' was nothing but a rent in a cliff. General Custer gave it the name of Ludlow's Cave in honor of Captain [William] Ludlow the En-gineer Officer with the expedition, though I cannot tell by what force of argument he can call it a cave."

On July 11, as they marched along, the country grew thick with prickly pears. The trail grew bloody from needles piercing the feet of the livestock. George Penwell (who would later fight under Lieutenant Edward Godfrey at the Little Bighorn and survive) rode along distractedly. His horse suddenly felt the stab of a prickly pear needle lodged an inch deep in his flank. The horse shot off with Penwell hanging on the side. At this speed he couldn't get back up in his saddle. The laughs and cheers of the men spooked the horse even more until the animal finally stopped.

Then it simply bucked. The soldier hung to the horse until the saddle girth broke and everything fell to the ground. Luckily neither horse nor man was hurt. The episode gave everyone something to chuckle about for quite awhile.

By July 14 Custer's force had entered a little valley. The troopers savored the orders given: layover and rest the next day, get caught up on laundry. Because some of the miners traveling with the party panned for gold in the creek—without any luck—Custer penned "Prospect Valley" on his map of the area. Although smoke signals let the men know the Sioux were at hand, most of the troopers took this time to do wash.

Ewert noted that "The boys—nearly six hundred in number—scattered along the creek banks converted into laundresses, busy as bees, rubbing[,] scrubbing[,] splashing their linen in genuine washwoman style. Many after two hours of hard rubbing found his shirt, drawers, socks and all dirty, if not dirtier than when he commenced. Some of the younger ones with wealthy parents and good homes in the east, unused to such a life were nearly crying for vexation at this failure."

On July 17, at about 9:00 AM, the soldiers spied the Black Hills in the distance some forty miles ahead.

"What a glorious moment! Before us lay the mysterious hills, black as ink, range upon range stretching into the distance aloof as ever. Signal smokes came at regular intervals intimidating our scouts it seemed. Gen. Custer was thrown upon his own cunning to try to find the best road. As we sat on our horses looking toward the supposed New Eldorado, the conversation naturally turned upon 'filthy lucre'—Gold. How could we smuggle several large nuggets into our wagon. Our plans for claims were many and varied. They gave us much pleasure."

BY JULY 20, Ewert and his fellow travelers got to witness the spectacular sights of the Black Hills firsthand. Massive pines, with their dark green foliage, gave the Hills their name, Ewert noted. The men agreed the gorges flanked by high rocky cliffs and grotesque eccentric figures cut in the rock faces presented some of the finest scenery most had ever seen.

Custer refused to let Black Hills topography block him. On July 21, in an especially steep-walled area, he had the men dig around points of the hill, cut a few hundred trees, and then roll boulders to one side. With the two chasms filled up, the party crossed into the valley of the Redwater Creek. After filling his canteen with crystal clear stream water, Ewert gazed at specimens and rock samples collected by Custer.

"He had the trunk of a petrified tree, two prairie owls, a hawk, porcupine, beautiful horned toads and three live rattlesnakes. In transporting these he selected the best ambulances. Sick men for whom ambulances were taken had to ride in rickety, broken-springed affairs whose joltings were scarcely a degree easier than an old army wagon."

Ewert noted with disgust more problems with the health care in Custer's army. When he heard one of the men in his company, Private John "Cunny" Cunningham, was sick, he went to visit him in the ambulance. On reaching the wagon he found Cunningham lying on his back exposed and dying. He covered him up and checked on another companion also sick with dysentery.

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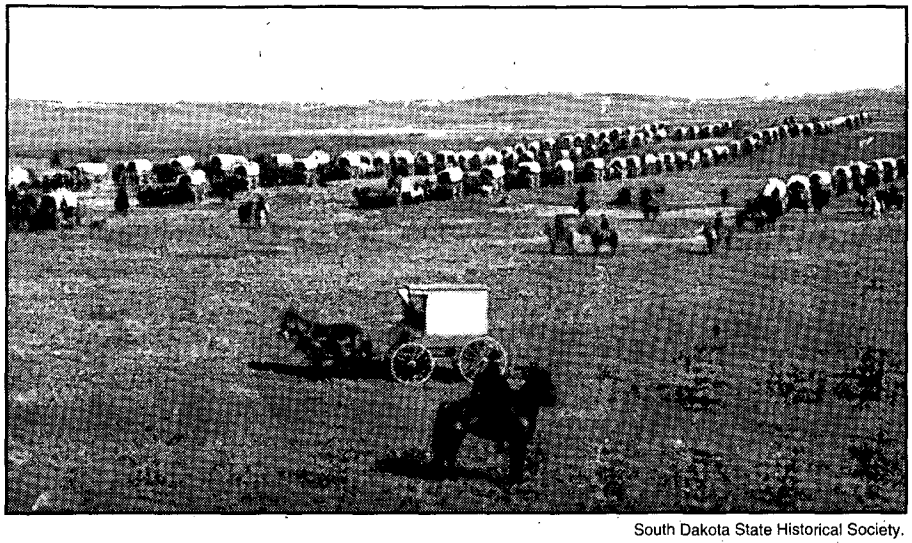

South Dakota State Historical Society.

Wagons lined up and ready to march just outside Fort Abraham Lincoln.

He discovered doctors had ignored both men since the night before. One doctor, S.J. Allen, whom the men afterward called "Butcher Allen," had Cunningham up and marching despite his blood loss, weakness, fainting, and falling off his horse.

"These doctors, guardians of the health of a thousand men, doctors paid high salaries, neglected the men and let this man lay in broiling rays of July sun, dying, crazy."

Theodore Ewert went to Dr. J.W. Williams, the chief medical officer. He found him lying on his bed in a drunken sleep. He called and shook him to no avail. Ewert went on to Adjutant General Lieutenant James Calhoun, begging him to get the doctor to visit Cunningham.

"While talking to him tears came into my eyes as I described to him Cunny's condition. Seeing I took the matter to heart he went immediately to Dr. Williams and with great effort awoke him. Williams after rubbing his eyes, thinking over things for 15 minutes, staggering over to the ambulance he barely raised his feet on the steps at the rear of the ambulance. He looked at the dying man with a drunken stare. He stumbled back to his tent, fell on his bed and slept."

After Ewert had over a dozen of his comrades check on Cunningham, Professor A.B. Donaldson , a botanist, stepped in on a discussion they had. Donaldson eventually reported the matter to Custer who called up Dr. Allen. Allen then claimed the man was not dying, prescribed opium pills and left. Ewert and four others agreed to stay up with the man. At 11:25 that night, John Cunningham died.

The next day, July 22, another man lay dying in an ambulance, only this time circumstances of his death were far different. The man, Private George Turner, had been in the service about four years, coming in as a new recruit with another private, William Roller.

The two had been in an argument since before the expedition, and in this fight Turner had had the worst of it and ached for revenge. All through the Black Hills, Turner taunted, insulted, abused, and egged on Roller. Roller, being quiet in nature, put up with it until he could stand it no longer.

Then he told Turner to cease or he'd use his revolver. This ploy seemed to work. But then on the morning of July 22, Roller awoke to find his horse cross-hobbled, a technique that makes it impossible for the horse to move without falling over.

Roller proclaimed any man doing such a foul deed a "dirty son of a bitch." Turner ran out of his tent and asked if he implied him a son of a bitch. Roller said not, but that the one who'd done the deed was one. Turner said he believed Roller meant him and he'd take it that way and threw his hand to the right side where he usually kept his six-shooter.

But he forgot he had moved it to the left side that morning. The delay gave Roller the upper hand and he shot Turner from four feet away. The fallen man had his revolver in his hand, and if he hadn't shifted sides that morning, surely Roller would have been on the ground instead.

The ball went through Turner's abdomen and lodged in his spine. He was placed in an ambulance and died on the march at two that afternoon. No men in his company showed sympathy. He had few if any friends among them. Roller immediately gave up and was turned over to civil authorities at Fort Lincoln when the command returned. Since he did not die at the Little Bighorn two years later—he was probably in prison—his action against Turner may have saved his life twice.

After this excitement the expedition continued over hilly, rough, waterless ground with red soil. At three the afternoon of July 22, someone in the rear discovered a tiny spring that all who had passed over it already had trampled to make it barely drinkable. Still men fell upon it with blackened tongues and severe thirsts.

Before sundown Turner and Cunningham were sealed in canvas and buried while the band played a funeral dirge. Ewert played "Taps" on his bugle while heads were bared. The men built fires on the lonely graves to hide them.

After a day of rest, the expedition headed east along a chain of hills covered with stands of huge cottonwoods and pines. Icy streams flanked the men whenever they rested. During any pauses men scrambled up boulders to grab strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, and gooseberries.

The next morning Ewert discovered a lovely echo when he bugled "first call." It repeated his phrases almost entirely. The force then headed down into an area then known as "Floral Valley," now Cold Springs Creek Valley.

"We sat and gazed from our horses on a narrow crooked valley

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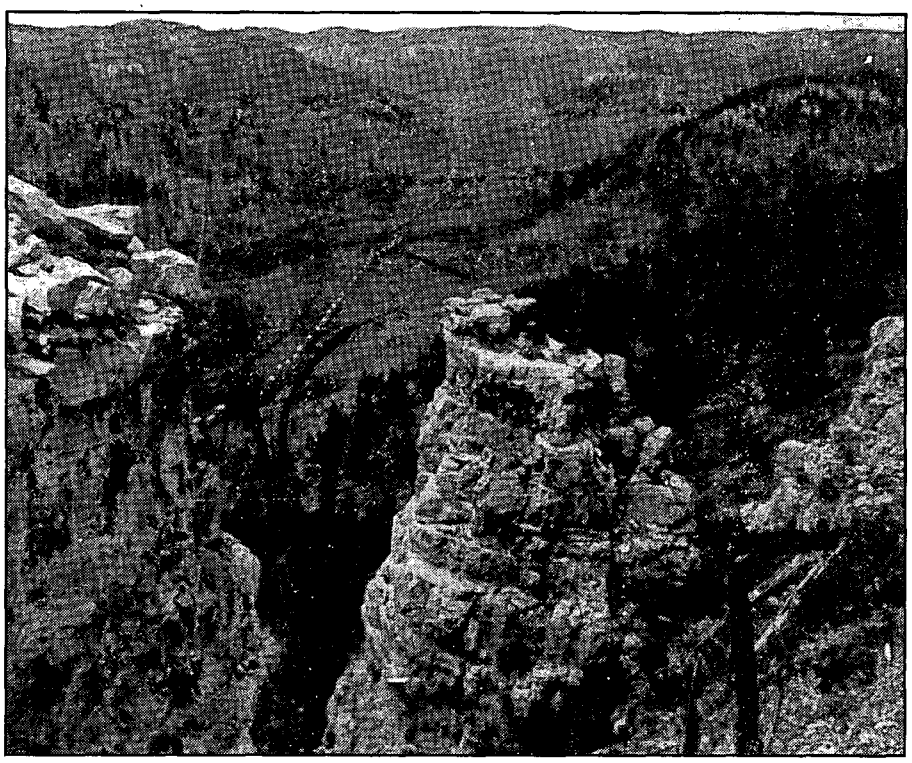
stretching away as far as could be seen, literally crammed with flowers. The botanist Donaldson said he gathered 42 different species. Deer abounded and we surprised them coming around a bend. Ten or twenty on seeing us gave a whistle and bounded up the sides of the valley hiding in young cottonwood trees."

Custer, in a telegram to the Department of Dakota, St. Paul, Minnesota, added this about the valley—dubbed Floral Valley:

> So luxuriant in growth were they that men plucked them without dismounting. Amid all the colors and perfume it was strange to glance back at advancing columns of cavalry and behold men with beautiful bouquets in their hands and headgear of horses decorated with wreaths of flowers fit to crown a queen of May.



South Dakota State Historical Society.

William Illingworth's photo of wagons entering Castle Valley and the Black Hills.

The next day Custer's scout, Bloody Knife, pointed out signs of an encampment. They came upon five tepees and were able to capture twenty-seven inhabitants who didn't seem surprised to see their captors. Among them stood One Stab, the chief of this Blackfoot Sioux tribe. Just before the camp had been broken up, one of the captives jerked a shotgun out of the hand of a scout. The scout in turn pulled out his pistol.

The Sioux whipped his pony and flew down the valley. Nearly ten shots were fired after him. A trail of blood led the troopers to believe he had been wounded in the shoulder.

Upon returning to the other captives, who were supposedly breaking up their camp, the soldiers found all had fled except One Stab. He came to resent Custer's new job for him as forced guide through the Black Hills. The chief found himself under guard day and night.

On July 30, different companies organized various teams for the first in a series of baseball games. The "Actives" beat the "Athletes" 11-6. The game took two hours and twenty-five minutes and the entire command witnessed the event. Ewert proclaimed it the first baseball game ever played in the Black Hills. That night the officers celebrated under the hospital tarp with a champagne supper. By 10:00 PM they were rather inebriated. Though Ewert provided no names, he did mention Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Dent Grant, President Ulysess Grant's son, as "one of the party and not the most sober one either."

Custer and his party named one camp "Agnes" Park for a friend of Elizabeth Custer. Encircling this site flowed a creek teeming with catfish, bluegill, and trout. Men caught the fish by the hundreds.

The high peaks of the Black Hills surrounded the men. The list of names, Ewert noted, included:

> Custer's Gulch, Forsyth's Glen, Custer's Valley, etc. etc. etc. This showing that the Custer Brothers believe too that charity begins at home and if no one will preserve their name to posterity they will do so themselves, "via Black Hills".

By the first week in August the expedition remained encamped in a spot from where miners could hike out and explore creeks. All waited breathlessly for the shout, "I've found it!"

On August 5, a miner panned a creek and brought up a few specks of yellow. They didn't impress Ewert. He noted in his diary that soon the telegraph wires would burn with the news of the discovery. But he offered his own advice to those dreaming of getting rich quick:

> I would say in friendship and caution to those from the overcrowded East, seeking to earn a living here: "Come not to the Black Hills" do not believe everything told of the Black Hills and discoveries made here. If there is gold in this country, you and I are certain to get none of it. Therefore remember that "a bird in hand is worth two in the bush" and if you can make a living in the East, remain there. Gold was found, that is certain. I had my own eyes for proof. But earth containing the precious metal is so scarce very few persons will be the lucky owners of any.

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South Dakota State Historical Society.

From left to right: Bloody Knife, George Armstrong Custer, Colonel William Ludlow, and Private Noonan. The bear, Ewert claimed, was no grizzly but "an old cinnamon, claws were worn, some teeth broken, and his head and body scar-covered."

Few took Ewert's advice. Unfortunately for the Sioux and their protected, sacred lands—theirs "for as long as the grass grows"—over 800 million dollars worth of raw gold has been extracted from the Black Hills since Custer's 1874 expedition.

When Custer and several others killed a "grizzly" bear, and the trip's photographer, William Illingworth, recorded the incident for the public, Ewert had a different opinion.

> All chimed in with him [Custer] simply because he was commanding officer, but as I knew it was no grizzly but a genuine cinnamon, I expressed myself to that effect. The sour looks and angry frowns the assertion brought me kept me from insisting. But this bear was an old cinnamon, claws were worn, some teeth broken and his head and body scar-coverd. General Custer of course wishes to magnify his discoveries to the fullest extent, but I cannot comprehend in what manner the species of a single bear is to add to or detract from the importance of his work.

On the morning of August 8, Ewert and a soldier named Davis got permission to go hunting. By the time they reached a creek bottom they were lost. Descending the creek bottom led to some falls of over 100 feet. Nothing remained but to climb a wall-like slope. Horses had to be led, the men following, sweating, fuming, puffing, fretting, half-mad, sun-burned, and scared.

When they made the ridge top they had no place to go but down into another dry creek bed, one worse than the previous one. Now came a climb up a ladder-like set of rocks. Ewert's horse, Monkey, jumped during the climb and fell into the creek bed below. Though it looked like the fall killed him, the horse shook his head and appeared to enjoy the fall.

Ewert climbed the other side ,then went about four miles around to rejoin Davis. He reached him hot, dry, angry, worn-out, and hungry. After a ten minute rest they started up again, but to where neither had a clue.

A glistening creek far below in the dark green firs decided for them. They would follow it southeast as far as it led. On the way down they stumbled upon an icy spring. Large and lovely, it was the headwaters of the creek.

The creek opened into a valley covered with wild cherry trees laden with ripe fruit. A single deer leaped away from the two men. Hunting it didn't cross their minds. All they could think of was rejoining the main party.

They talked idly, each trying to avoid sounding afraid. The end of the valley looked like it led completely out of the Black Hills. There was no sign of the others, no campfire smoke, no dust clouds, no human life anywhere around. After two miles of hiking and talking to hide nervousness, a "How!" came from behind. Both jumped, fingers ready on cocked triggers.

"Me Ree, big scout Custer. Good Me! Good Me!"

"Our red brother followed us, verifying the adage that 'Misery loves company'."

But the scout knew less than they did about the location of camp. The three traveled together until Ree grew impatient with their slow progress and disappeared. After descending and ascending countless ravines and slopes, crawling, tumbling, sliding, rolling, wading, and falling, the two spied a wisp of smoke hanging over a valley three miles away.

Davis argued it must be mist not smoke. He wanted to camp until next morning. Ewert persuaded him to press on and they dragged themselves into camp, exhausted and famished, ready to strangle anyone suggesting "hunting" again. The two pledged never to hunt again in the Black Hills. Despite his exhaustion, Ewert found himself detailed to deliver orders to a different com-

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pany's commanders four or five miles away.

On August 11, James King of H Company fell sick, fainting twice in the sun. Doctors denied him rest, and despite being unable to sit on his horse, he couldn't ride in the ambulance. Custer had filled these with black servants, owls, and rattlesnakes.

The next day King died, as Theodore Ewert put it, of "criminal neglect, pushed and crowded to his death by the two human brutes with us called doctors."

Ewert ranted to his diary on the unfairness of this man's preventable death. King, well-loved, inoffensive, good-hearted, honest, sober, and of sterling integrity, died for want of proper attendance. He had a few months left until military release and a young wife waiting at home. Ewert offered the soldier's complaint heard to this day:

> Have our Senators, Representatives and Generals no interest in the soldier? Is he a dog in "facto"? Is his life less precious than that of a horse? The latter gets the attendance of a veterinary surgeon when sick; a man, attendance when the drunken brute with us sees fit to visit him, and then only to tell him with an insulting, drunken stare that he is only playing off and needs no medicine. The sick man is fairly pushed into the grave.

Apparently Custer ordered the man buried that evening, two hours after his death. Major Joseph Tilford objected and pushed to have the burial next morning. Custer did not wait the next morning but moved out while Companies C, G, K, M, and H marched solemnly to the grave as the band played. Captain Benteen gave the service while the men of H Company wept freely.

The expedition, for all its trouble, expense, exhaustion, and even death had achieved its main objective—finding gold in the Black Hills. Gold had been rumored to exist there according to geologists and a few early whites passing through the area. Its mission fulfilled, the 1874 expedition now started on the long trip home.

As the train rolled out on its homeward trek, three men who had been lost, as Ewert and Davis had, caught up with the group. If they hadn't made it back that day they surely wouldn't have lasted as they and their horses returned completely worn out.

Marches grew severe and long as water vanished into alkali potholes and prickly pears again vexed the men. Then came a huge expanse recently burned by the natives. The men figured it was part of a plan to force them to release starving horses that the Sioux would willingly take on. The Seventh had a counter plan—shoot all worn-out stock instead of letting the natives take them.

> These poor brutes seem almost human when they have become so weak that they just stagger along. We see them making desperate efforts to still keep up. When the drivers find that they can no longer drive a worn-out horse they allow him to fall behind, and when the rear guard comes up they shoot the animal though it is mighty hard sometimes to kill a pet horse who's been the soldier's best friend for years, trained to look to man only for kindness and protection.

On August 30, 1874, they reached within ten miles of Fort Lincoln and stopped to rest the animals and make coffee while pickets were thrown out in various directions toward Fort Lincoln to block anyone of the command, soldiers, teamsters, scouts, or officers from slipping ahead of "Chief Custer."

"He wanted to be the first. His was to be the honor. He wanted to surprise the people in the fort. His, and no other's voice, the one to proclaim: 'Here I am! The expedition is in safely! I have discovered gold! I am big chief. Me big Inj__, no no not Injun, but me big, big, big, well big something! Here is George A. ready to have his noble brow entwined by laurels—fetch on your wreaths!"

As the entourage rode past headquarters, officers dropped out, embraced their wives, and retired amid welcoming kisses and caresses. Mrs. Custer swept out to meet her husband and when she came within "catching" distance she "fainted."

Theodore Ewert ended his record of the 1874 expedition with little good to say. The Custer brothers, uncles, and nephews would happily fill civilian appointments according to Ewert, keep the greenbacks flowing in and preserve the family honor. Not certain how many mules and horses perished, he noted the number at close to fifty.

"This is a gain for the government? As a whole, the majority will vote the expedition a failure."

Private Theodore Ewert, trumpeter of Company H, Seventh United States Cavalry was discharged at Fort Bridger, April 10, 1876, slightly more than two months before the disastrous fight at the Little Bighorn. He would reenlist in 1878 and then be discharged as sergeant in 1883.

After serving in the Eighth Infantry from 1883 to 1889, he resigned as captain to serve the state of Illinois as assistant adjutant general. An administrative change left him jobless and struggling to live. He tried real estate sales in Missouri, one job among many others. After his wife's death in 1901 he entered the Illinois Soldier's and Sailor's Home in Quincy in 1906 and died seven months later.

John M. Carroll, the editor who was responsible for tracking down Ewert's descendants to obtain the diary, left us his thoughts on Private Ewert's writings:

"None are as dramatic, interesting, humorous or keen as his record kept on the Black Hills Expedition. It is too bad his diary of the Yellowstone Expedition of 1873 has never surfaced. Possibly it still exists somewhere in some attic. When discovered it is bound to be a major discovery of that year."

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Custer's Two Burials

by Robin Pennock

Sunday, June 25, 1876. The late afternoon sun beat down mercilessly on the hill which rose to the east of the Little Bighorn River, Montana Territory. The cacophony of guns and shouts, along with whinnies of terrified horses, had died down except for the occasional round of gunfire squeezed off by the celebrating braves. Slowly, Indian women and children came up the hill from the valley below, stopping at each trooper's body to strip and mutilate. Fanning out over the hill, dipping down into the ravines where perhaps an hour before the men of five companies of the Seventh Cavalry had stood their ground until the end, the women tended to the bloody work of hauling the bounty of victory back to the village spread out along the western side of the Greasy Grass, the Little Bighorn.

Western Publications

Elizabeth and George A. Custer

Theories abound as to what lay behind this scene, what combination of misinformation, courage, and foolhardiness from the army point of view; what mix of luck, skill, courage, and daring from the Indian point of view. Controversy stirs on each point. Even the actual time of the battle comes into question. According to Evan Connell, "In Montana it could not have been much later than noon, although watches carried by soldiers registered midafternoon. Until 1894 there were no time zones; each settlement or village or fort correlated its clocks with a metropolis. Fort Lincoln operated on Chicago time." George Armstrong Custer and the Seventh Cavalry had come from Fort Lincoln, Dakota Territory; thus, in central Montana, they operated on Chicago time.

Whatever led to the battle, what came from the battle, aside from unending historical argument, is clear: A wake-up call was sent to the American people, just in time for the nation's centennial. A nation which had fought a Civil War and reunited itself could not suffer the death of such a goodly number of its sons at the hands of a people

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widely viewed as pagan. The fact that Custer had fallen with his men underscored this thirst for vengeance. Custer was a bonafide national hero. With his death, the highwater mark for the American Indian in the war to keep their land was reached.

The status of Custer as hero was henceforth nurtured at every turn by Elizabeth Bacon Custer, the young widow of the fallen leader. "Libbie," as she was known to her darling "Autie," devoted the rest of her life to the twin goals of earning a decent living, which was no easy task for a single woman given to keeping proprieties in the late nineteenth century, and enshrining the name of her late husband forever in the pantheon of American heroes. Part of that enshrinement had to be a place where Libbie and the legions of Custer admirers could go, to bow their heads respectfully graveside of the warrior. The Little Bighorn battlefield did not work. The initial burials were little more than coverings-up, and the whole scene was so far off the beaten track that even today, students of the battle must make complicated travel arrangements to arrive on the spot. As a graduate of West Point, Custer was entitled to burial at the United States Military Academy. As talk of recovering at least the officers' bodies grew more determined, Libbie settled on the venerable cemetery at West Point as her husband's final resting place.

The time between Custer's death on June 25, 1876, and his reburial at West Point on October 10, 1877, presents quite a story. The precise moment and place of Custer's death cannot be pinpointed; writers on the subject routinely add a footnote indicating that from the moment Custer and the five companies remaining to him galloped out of the sight of Trumpeter John Martin, last surviving member of the Seventh Cavalry to see Custer alive, all scenarios are conjecture. Did Custer fall early, down toward the Little Bighorn, when Captain George Yates's two-company command advanced on the village? Or did he stay with the remaining three companies, to be joined later by the remnants of Yates's sortie as all apparently tried to fight their way to the north end of the ridge paralleling the Little Bighorn. This is the traditional "last stand" site, and also the place where Custer's body was found. However, Custer was not only the on-field leader but a person of national repute; had he been killed early in the fight somewhere else on the field, it is likely that the troopers would have carried the body with them as they retreated, if conditions had not yet deteriorated to the point of chaos. Custer might have gone with Yates, simply because Yates was heading for the village. However, the more common perception is that Custer remained with the larger force and proceeded north toward what is today called Custer Hill.

Evidence for this point of view includes expended ammunition from his Remington rifle found around and under his body. This fact seems to indicate that Custer was firing until just before he fell. The presence of Tom Custer's body on Custer Hill with his brother increases speculation. Most of Tom Custer's troop was found elsewhere on the field. Did Tom remain with his brother, apart from his troop? Unlikely. Was Custer shot early, Tom leaving his troop to come to his brother? Possibly, although this would assume easier communication between the separate groups of cavalrymen on the field than probably actually existed. Tom Custer also was an experienced fighter and would not have left his troops unless ordered to do so. Had Myles Keogh, on whom command would have devolved following Custer's death, already been killed or at least so separated from the group on Custer Hill that he could not assume command? Finally, the body of Custer's Canadian-born adjutant, Lieutenant William W. Cooke, was found near Custer. This indicates that Custer himself was alive and in command until the end, because Cooke would be near the field command. Perhaps it was Tom who died early in the battle, with his brother attempting to rescue that body.

Speculation is endless. Because of the evidence of the spent ammunition found around and under George Custer, it seems most likely that he was one of the last surviving cavalrymen at the battle. His body was found just below the north end of the ridge, a few yards from the area now marked by a wrought iron fence. There were two identified wounds, a bullet hole in the left side near his heart, and a bullet hole to the left temple. This latter mark later inspired some conjectures about suicide, although this is highly improbable because Custer was right-handed and there were reportedly no powder burns on his temple. Since either wound would have been quickly fatal, it is also unlikely that he lay wounded on the field for any protracted period of time.

Speculation is endless. Because of the evidence of the spent ammunition found around and under George Custer, it seems most likely that he was one of the last surviving cavalrymen at the battle.

Custer's body was stripped, all but the socks. There are several accounts of dead troopers being found with their socks on; indeed, one was later identified by his name written in a sock. Indians did not need or use socks much; thus, these items were not viewed as valuable booty. Everything else of Custer's was gone. It is clear that the gathered Indians had well over twenty-four hours to scavenge the field, for the village did not break up until late on June 26. Arms, unexpended ammunition, clothing, personal items such as knives and watches, much had been taken, but a considerable amount of debris remained.

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Following the departure of the Indians, the dead troopers and horses on the battlefield lay through another night until, on the morning of Tuesday, June 27. Brigadier General Alfred Terry arrived with his troops at the north end of the now-abandoned village on the west side of the Little Bighorn. He dispatched Lieutenant James H. Bradley with some soldiers to cross the river and investigate the large dark shapes on the hill opposite. Bradley soon returned with the news. The dark objects were dead horses, surrounded by equally dead soldiers, dead for two days, stripped, and beginning the natural process of decomposition under the hot Montana sun.

Custer's body was identified, apparently easily. Not one of the many soldiers who were on the battlefield in subsequent hours, either from Terry's command or from the joint Reno-Benteen troops which had been pinned down by the Indians less than five miles to the south, ever expressed any doubt as to which was Custer's body. It was found in a group that also contained Custer's Canadian aide-de-camp, Lieutenant William Cooke, Tom Custer, nephew Autie Reed, Yates, and, at a little distance, Boston Custer. Cooke and Tom Custer had been badly mutilated, but the others were apparently not excessively cut.

Captain Benteen received permission to take his H troop over the battlefield in an effort to identify as many men as possible. Reno also toured the field. All were sickened by the increasingly grisly sight, replete with rather extreme mutilations in some cases. Custer, however, appears to have not been subject to scalping or other frequently encountered mutilations. Benteen easily recognized the bodies on Custer Hill, and Lieutenant Godfrey, who had been with the Reno-Benteen contingent, later wrote "The General was not mutilated at all. He laid on his back, his upper arms on the ground, the hands folded or so placed as to cross the body above the stomach; his position was natural and one that we had seen hundred of time while taking cat naps during halts on the march. One hit was in the front of the left temple, and one in the left breast at or near the heart." Actually, the body had been moved into a fully prone position by the time Lieutenant Godfrey saw it. F.F. Girard, interpreter with the Seventh

National Archives

Photographer S.J. Morrow took this photo of "Custer's Ridge" when the army returned to Little Bighorn for bodies in 1877.

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Cavalry, reported to Godfrey that Custer had originally been in a sitting position between two other bodies, his right forearm over the top of one of them. Apparently, the body had been lowered and stretched out after Girard viewed it but before Godfrey came on the scene some minutes later.

Trooper Theodore Goldin, whose later correspondence with Benteen and subsequent writings on the Little Bighorn until his death in the 1930s provide much interesting, if not clear, material, wrote, "...the wounds in Custer's body as I saw them June 27, were made by a gun of smaller caliber than the .45, and we calculated it may have been from a Winchester or Henry. There were no powder marks about the wounds at all." It was widely rumored that the Indians at the Little Bighorn were armed with rapid-fire Winchesters, and this then was the type of weapon which probably dealt the two blows.

A number of writers have speculated about another set of wounds, unknown to the observers at the time. According to Indian witnesses, some Cheyenne women recognized Custer as a sort of in-law, due to his alleged affair with a relative of theirs several years before. The Indians at that time had told Custer they hoped he would listen carefully to them and never be at war; apparently, he had not listened. Therefore, on the battlefield his eardrums were punctured with a sewing awl to remind him of his lapse and improve his hearing in the next life. If this is true, these would have been the only Indians to have recognized "Long Hair," as Custer had had Libbie cut his hair very short just prior to the column's departure on May 17 from Fort Lincoln. Custer, at thirty-seven, was also beginning to show signs of approaching baldness, so the amount of hair present on his head would have been minimal.

Rumors of mutilations, particularly to Custer's thighs, spread in coming years. Complications to discerning the truth in this matter include the difficulty in telling the difference between a battle wound inflicted by a hatchet, which the Indians carried and used, and a mutilation occurring after death, the state of the bodies after many hours in the Montana sun, and the concern of almost everyone on site to protect Elizabeth Custer from the goriest of details.

Western Publications

Myles Keogh

Terry, joined by the Seventh Cavalry survivors from the Reno-Benteen fight, now faced the task of burying the bodies. Captain McDougall of the Seventh Cavalry, along with his B troop, scoured the debris left by the departing Indians at the village site to find implements for burial. As the group crossed the river on the morning of June 28, ready to begin the grisly chore, the horse called Comanche, whose rider, Captain Myles Keogh, lay among the dead on the ridge, stepped shakily out from some brush. The horse had seven wounds, but was the only living remainder of Custer and five companies. Although some other Seventh Cavalry horses had probably survived, if they had escaped the fate of being shot for breastworks, the horses which were in good condition were captured by the Indians. Comanche had either wandered away or had been judged to be not likely to survive. A trooper was detailed to care for Comanche, and the rest proceeded to their task. Comanche would survive for many years, an honored symbol to the Seventh Cavalry.

The troopers spread across the battlefield, searching behind rocks and in clumps of bushes for bodies. Three days of heat had played upon them. Troopers, scraping shallow graves with their inadequate tools, then heaping dirt and rocks over the bodies, were repeatedly overcome with nausea. The job they did was haphazard at best, although no more could be expected under the conditions. They knew that scavenging animals and hard Montana rains could all too easily undo their poor efforts. Custer and his brother were buried by a detail headed by Sergeant John Ryan of M Company, and comprised of Corporals Harrison Davis and Frank Neeley, and Private James H. Severs. Custer might have escaped mutilation, but Tom did not, being horribly cut in addition to being pierced with a number of arrows, as well as scalped. Whether Tom Custer's heart at also been cut out or not—the result of a prior feud with Rain-in-the-Face—is a matter of some conjecture. Sergeant Ryan did think that Rain-in-the-Face had removed Tom Custer's heart. Ryan recounted, "We dug a shallow grave about 15 to 18 inches deep at the foot of a hillock. We laid the General in as tenderly as a soldier could with his brother along side of him, covering the bodies with pieces of blankets and tents and spread earth on top, spreading it as well as we could making it look as near a mound as possible. We then took a basket of an Indian 'Travois' placing it upside down over the grave and pinning it to the ground with stakes, placing large stones around it to keep the wolves from digging it

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The secretary of war officially rejected General Philip Sheridan's request to recover Custer's body for burial at West Point in this letter, dated April 18, 1877.

Copy
Headquarters of the Army
Adjutant General's Office
Washington, April 18th, 1877

Lieut. General P.H. Sheridan
[illegible]Military Division
of the Missouri
Chicago, Illinois

Sir:

I have the honor, by direction of the General of the Army, to acknowledge receipts of your communication to him of the 4th instant, proposing, with the sanction of the Depart-ment, in case the necessary funds can be obtained, to bury all the bodies of officers killed with General Custer, in June, 1876 (except that of General Custer) at Fort Leaven-worth, and recommending that General Custer be buried at West Point.

The question was submitted by the Genera to the Secretary of War, who regrets that your applications cannot be granted, for the reason that no appropriation is applicable to the purpose, and the Accounting officers do not allow amounts for such expenses.

Very respectfully,
Your obediant servant
Adj. Ed. D. Townsend
Adjutant General

Adjutant General's Office
Washinton, April19, 1877
Official copy respectfully furnished for the information of the Quarter-master General.

L.H. [illegible]
Asst. Adj. General

Note: *The "General of the Army" referred to was William Tecumseh Sherman.*

National Archives

Copy

Headquarters of the Army
Adjutant General's Office,
Washington, April 18th, 1877

Lieut. General P. H. Sheridan
Comdg Military Division of the Missouri
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The question was submitted by the General to the Secretary of War, who regrets that your applications cannot be granted, for the reason that no appropriation is applicable to the purpose, and the accounting officers do not allow accounts for such expenses.

Very respectfully,
Your obedient servant,
Ed. D. Townsend
Adjutant General

Adjutant General's Office
Washington April 19, 1877.
Official copy respectfully furnished for the information of the Quartermaster General.
L. H. Pease
Asst. Adjt. General

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up...." The grave site was a few yards below where the body had actually been found. There the soil had been too rocky for burial; the grave site represented the nearest softer ground.

In all accounts of this and the other burials, there is no mention of any organized religious observation. Certainly, individual troopers might have bowed their heads and muttered some prayers, but the day was hot and the work pressing. General Terry wanted to leave the site that evening, and everyone was hurrying. The actual departure was delayed until June 29, not due to difficulties encountered in the burials, but to the need to build stretchers to transport the wounded downstream to the mouth of the Little Bighorn, where the steamer *Far West* waited.

Thus, the battlefield was left in solitude. Between June 29 and the return of the army in July 1877 for exhumation detail, some Indians did visit the field, as probably did several scouts and traders. Indians told traders, however, that during all the summer of 1876, the stench from the battlefield kept most away.

The Army decided to mount an expedition the following year to recover the remains of the officers. It seems that General Phil Sheridan was the moving spirit behind this undertaking. On April 18, 1877, his communication to the Adjutant General's Office in Washington proposing the removal of the officers who fell with Custer to Fort Leavenworth and of Custer himself to West Point, resulted in denial. The secretary of war denied the request, due to a lack of appropriations to cover the costs. However, this position was shortly reversed, and later that month, Sheridan told his brother, Colonel Michael Sheridan, that arrangements were being put into place to recover the officers' bodies. By mid-May, the secretary of war had formally granted the request for the expedition, and Colonel Sheridan was put in command. Fittingly, cavalrymen of the Seventh, under Captain Henry Nowlan, were chosen for the work. They were then stationed at Fort Keogh, built at the juncture of the Tongue and the Yellowstone rivers, and they carried with them coffins to recover and ship the remains.

Western Publications

Thomas W. Custer, younger brother of George, and the only soldier to be awarded two Medals of Honor for service during the Civil War.

The issue of the state of the remains must have weighed heavily on Libbie Custer's mind. Although she was repeatedly assured that her husband had had a decent burial, rumors of bones strewing the field were frequently heard. Tom LaForge, a scout who had been on the field several times since the battle, saw all sorts of bones on top of the ground. These reports were horribly disturbing to Libbie and the other widows. It was with great relief, then, that Major Joseph Tilford of the Seventh Cavalry assured Libbie that he had personally supervised the exhumation of her husband and the transfer of his remains to a coffin for shipment east. Tilford included a lock of Custer's hair with his letter. Libbie also received a letter from Michael Sheridan. Sheridan told her he had easily located the stakes marking Custer's grave and had found cartridges with names on them, which allowed him to identify the bodies of all officers exhumed. Libbie rested a little easier, perhaps because she did not hear the other

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accounts, including an interesting tale of placing Custer's remains in a coffin, only to discover the name of a corporal written on the disintegrating blouse which accompanied the corpse. This item does not ring true, however, because as discussed earlier, all eyewitness accounts have the body of Custer naked on the field. At any rate, the corpses which were disinterred could not have been considered whole by the wildest stretch of the imagination, and scout George Herendeen, who thought Custer's corpse had suffered from attack by wolves, characterized the remains as "a double handful."

George Herendeen, who thought Custer's corpse had suffered from attack by wolves, characterized the remains as "a double handful."

Theodore Goldin chimes in on this note. In a letter written on January 27, 1930, he recounts conversations with members of the exhumation party.

> I asked these men at the time if they were at all sure that they recovered the bones of the officers; one of them promptly replied 'No, we took some pains to gather with each body bones enough to make a complete skeleton, but as most of the bodies had been exposed by foxes and coyotes, and in several instances portions of bodies had been dragged away, we were not at all certain as to the identity of any of the bodies, save that we gathered them near the point of where the marker indicated they had been originally buried." I could understand this, as I know that on my visit to the field in 1924 I found a hand and forearm, and a foot and lower part of a leg distant from any marker, and each widely separated from the others, and others, residents and visitors, have told me of similar finds, but I have always felt that it was better not to discuss these features out of regard to the feelings of those who mourned them.

The skull, some spine and a few other bones were probably the extent of the remains which were recovered.

In any shape, however, Custer's remains were on their way, first to Fort Lincoln, then via United States Express to Libbie. She soon discovered a problem, however, in the speed of the dispatch. General John Schofield, the West Point superintendent, had at Libbie's behest picked out a site for Custer's burial in the post cemetery. However, he alerted Libbie to a new danger in her campaign to keep the memory of George Armstrong Custer alive. If the remains arrived during the summer of 1877 and were interred then, the academy would be all but deserted. As this would not do, Libbie temporarily lodged the remains in Poughkeepsie, New York, in a vault owned by Philip Hamilton. Hamilton's son, Captain Louis Hamilton, had been killed at the Washita in 1868 and was in the family vault. Thus, old campaigning partners, Hamilton and Custer, were housed side by side until the West Point services occurred.

On October 10, 1877, the remains were transferred to the *Mary Powell,* which was draped in bunting as it made its way up the Hudson River to West Point. The casket was covered by the very flag which had been carried by Captain Hamilton at the Washita fight and was decorated with two stars of tuberose against a field of geraniums, shaped like Custer's epaulets. Flags along the route flew at half-mast, ships in the river dipped their pennants and crowds lined the shore. After arrival at West Point at 10:30 AM, the casket was carried on a hearse drawn by four black horses and draped in black crepe up to the Academy chapel, where the remains lay in state until the funeral began around 3:00 PM. Custer's sword and hat were nearby. Libbie arrived, accompanied by General Schofield, and was seated with other family members to the right of the aisle. Custer's father and sister, Maggie Custer Calhoun, who had recently buried her husband at Fort Leavenworth, were there, as were more distant Custer relatives and a brace of friends. Dr. John Forsyth, chaplain, began with sections of the Episcopal funeral service. Psalms 39 and 90 were said, then cadets carried the coffin to the waiting caisson. The traditional riderless horse, with boots reversed in the stirrups, followed the caisson as the group moved to the post cemetery. The distance between the chapel and the cemetery was longer than it is today, as the Cadet Chapel in 1877 was near today's library. As the procession moved from the chapel to the cemetery, a special funeral march was played. "Custer's Funeral March" had been composed by William Willing and set the tone for the mournful journey.

Custer's grave had been chosen by General Schofield and his wife. The casket was lowered, dirt was sprinkled on it, and Chaplain Forsyth spoke. The graveside portion of the service was ended with the firing of three volleys.

A Final Note: After many years, "Custer's Funeral March" can again be heard. The California Gold Rush Band, a group of Los Angeles area musicians who are dedicated to bringing back nineteenth century music played on authentic instruments, has included this piece on its CD entitled "Brass Mounted Army." Steven Charpie, member of the California Gold Rush Band, was given the piano score for the funeral march, and another band member, Les Benedict, rescored the piece for the Gold Rush Band. It was first played publicly by the band on July 4, 1996, during three performances at the Gene Autry Museum in Los Angeles.

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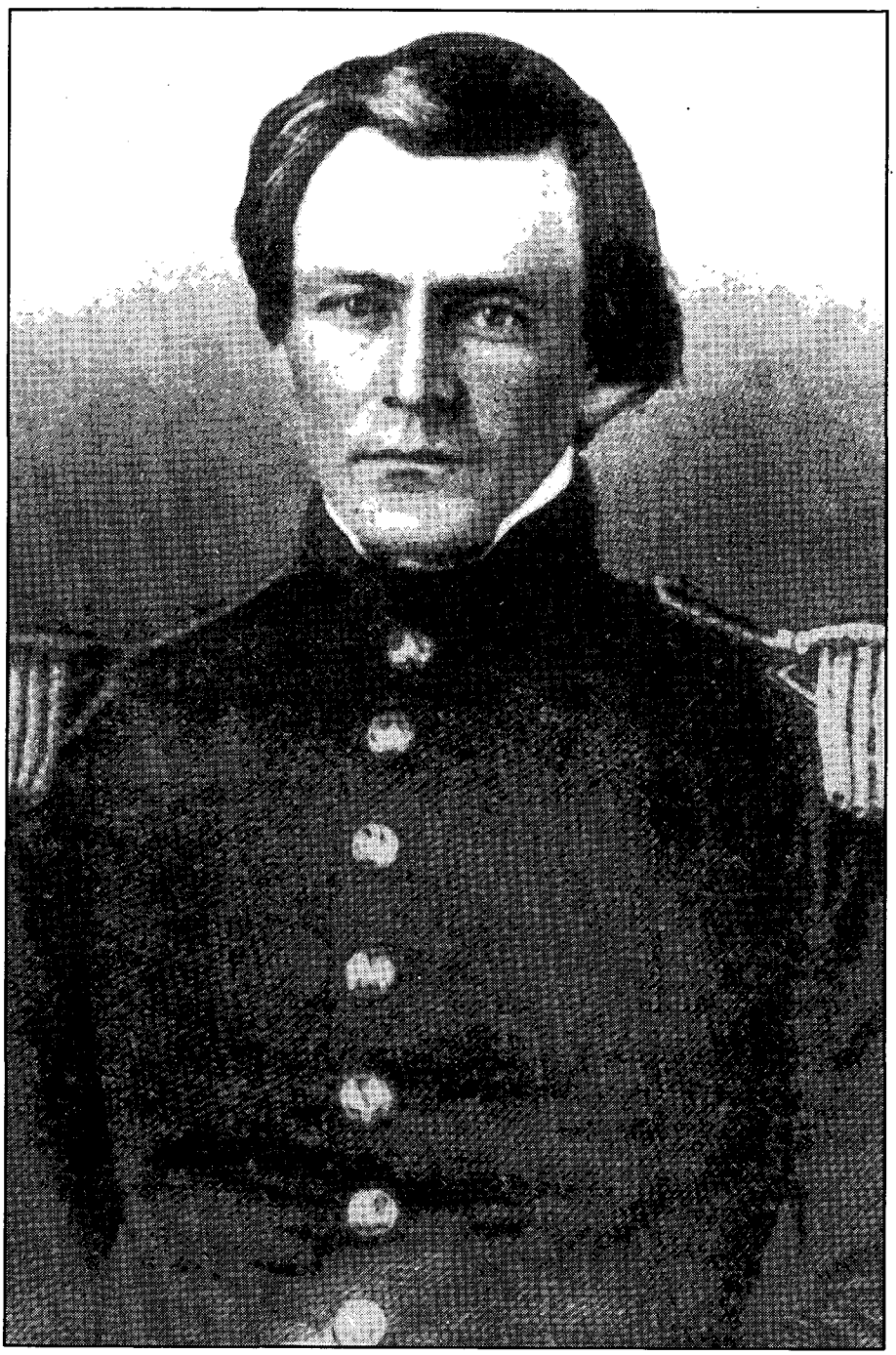
Grant's Folly at the Fort

BY JAN HOLDEN



Clark County Museum, Vancouver, Washington

Ulysses Grant, as he looked while stationed at Fort Vancouver in 1852.

History books portray Ulysses S. Grant as a military wizard and a financial fool, a man more suited to the battlefield than the farmer's field.

That's fair, considering the miserable luck Grant had in the spring of 1853, when the land he had leased and planted at Fort Vancouver was flooded by the rising Columbia River. It was a bitter experience for a man who had hoped that profits from selling his produce would enable him to bring his wife, Julia, and their two sons to the Northwest.

The Army had not assigned Grant to Fort Vancouver to push a plow. He and his Fourth Infantry Regiment had been instructed to protect the settlers against possible Indian uprisings. But Grant discovered upon his arrival in September 1852 that the Indians posed no real threat to the tranquility of the fort. Two months later, more than half of the troops were transferred to other posts throughout the Pacific Northwest and Captain Grant found his duties to be lighter than anticipated. In an effort to keep himself busy and raise the required capital for his family in Missouri, Grant made several investments that proved unwise.

While stationed at Fort Vancouver, Grant shared housing with a friend and former West Point classmate, Rufus Ingalls. Ingalls admired Grant and the two decided to pool their limited resources and go into business together. A few other young officers, with little to lose, willingly became partners in some risky ventures.

One of these schemes involved selling ice. Upon hearing that ice was going for outrageous prices in San Francisco, the men cut and loaded 100 tons aboard a sailing schooner. The ship's captain was also made a partner in the deal, but returned empty-handed several months later, declaring that fierce winds had slowed his journey and the ice had melted long before the ship could make port. Grant was discouraged, but not defeated.

Another of Grant's investment

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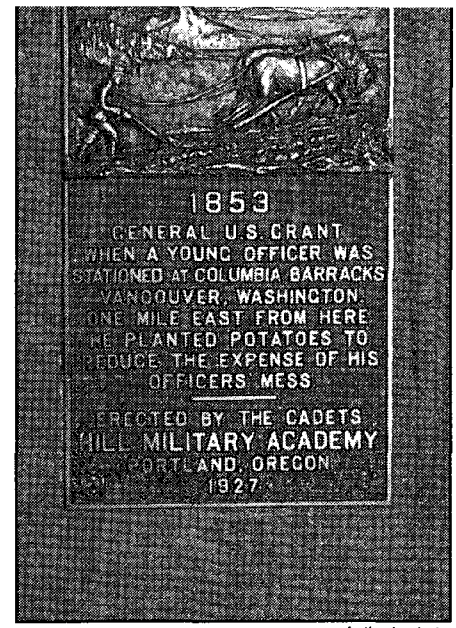
Author's photo

Contrary to popular belief, Grant never occupied this house, which bears his name, but roomed with Rufus Ingalls instead. The Grant House in Vancouver, Washington, is currently used as a folk art center and restaurant.



Author's photo

The monument to "Grant's Farm" in Vancouver, Washington.

fiascos involved poultry. Grant felt certain that there was a market for chickens in the mining communities of California.

And with that thought in mind, he proceeded to buy up every available bird within twenty miles of the fort. Old, young, plump, or thin, the birds were penned and shipped "live" by steamer for San Francisco. Most of the fowl died en route. And Grant once more was the loser.

The winter of 1852-53 was blustery and Grant grew increasingly melancholy. Yet his affection for the beautiful Northwest, and particularly his home at the fort, remained constant. Grant, who had been raised on an Ohio farm, couldn't help but consider the growing potential of the local soil.

Even before Grant got around to planting, he wrote in his diary: "The soil produces almost double any place I have been before with the finest market in the world for it after it is raised...."

That was Ulysses S. Grant, ever optimistic about his next venture.

When the winter took its leave and the first warm days of spring beckoned, Grant decided to put his shoulder to the plow. He and captains Wallen, Brent, and McConnell leased nearly 100 acres about a mile east of the fort along the river. They proceeded to work the ground and ready it for a bountiful harvest. Grant felt he could turn a tidy profit, as foodstuffs were scarce and extremely expensive. The men would produce a fine garden for themselves and sell any surplus to settlers. It was a surefire plan. At least that was what Grant believed in the beginning.

About a third of the acreage was devoted to potatoes and the remaining land was used to grow grain, onions, and corn. Grant took great pride in the fact that, by doing most of the manual labor himself, he was saving a lot of money. He also wrote in his journal of the surprise and joy that came over him when he discovered he was still able to plow as straight a furrow at age thirty-one.

After weeks of back-breaking labor, the seasonal rains caused the Columbia River to rise and flood the lowlands. Grant's beloved potato patch, his corn, onions, and grain were destroyed.

But fortune eluded him once again. After weeks of back-breaking labor, the seasonal rains caused the Columbia River to rise and flood the lowlands. Grant's beloved potato patch, his corn, onions, and grain were destroyed, and, with them, his dreams of becoming a gentleman farmer.

Had things been different, perhaps Ulysses Grant might have settled in the Northwest. How might that have altered our nation's history?

A Final Note: A marker commemorating Grant's farm was erected in 1927 and faces Davis Street, just north of East Fifth. It's an easy stroll from the Fort Vancouver site.

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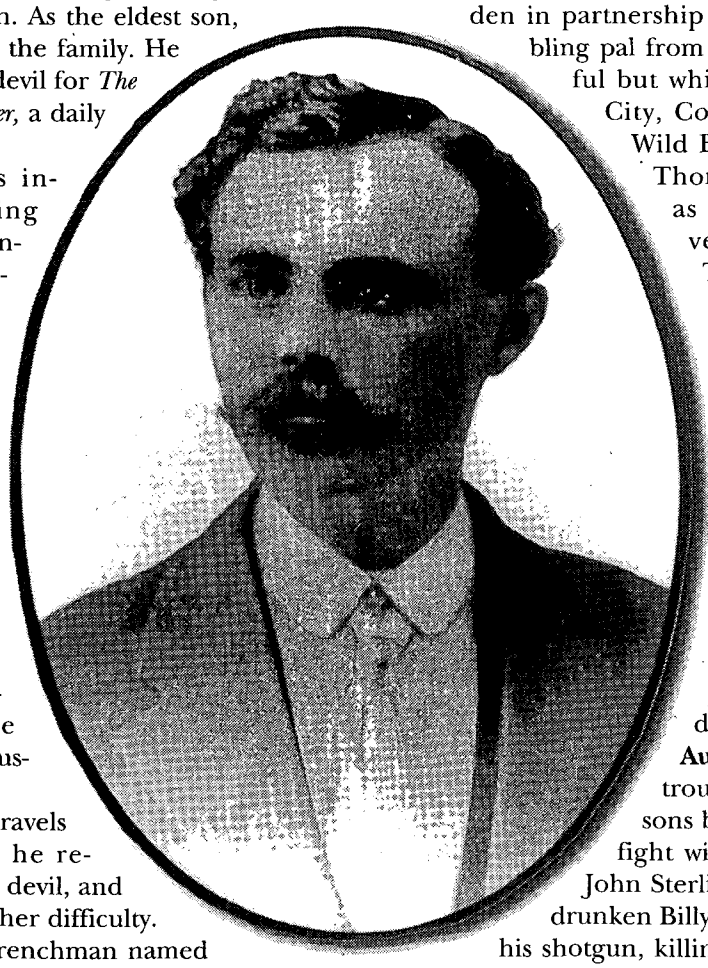
Ben Thompson By Chuck Parsons

November 11, 1843—Benjamin F. Thompson is born to William and Mary A. Thompson at Knottingley, England. He receives the typical education of a British child, and compared to many of his later wild west contemporaries was highly literate.

1858—It is unknown why the family moved to America, but by 1858 they are living in Austin, Texas. The father dies when Ben is relatively young, causing the boy to discontinue his education. As the eldest son, Ben is forced to support the family. He finds work as a printer's devil for *The Austin Southern Intelligencer,* a daily newspaper.



October 1858—Ben is involved in two shooting scrapes while still a teenager. One incident involves his shooting a boy in a hunting dispute but details are sketchy. In October he shoots and wounds a black boy named Joseph Smith (or Brown) and is arrested. In December he is sentenced to sixty days in jail and fined $100. On March 12, 1859, Texas Governor Hardin R. Runnels remits a portion of his fine and releases him from custody.

To change scenery Ben travels to New Orleans where he resumes work as a printer's devil, and also gets involved in another difficulty. According to legend a Frenchman named Emil de Tour insults a young lady and Thompson comes to her defense. De Tour challenges Thompson to a duel but is murdered before he can face Ben.

June 16, 1861—By 1860 Ben returns to Austin. With war clouds on the horizon Ben chooses the Confederacy. During the war Ben marries Catherine Moore who will give him a son and a daughter.

March 31, 1868—Ben now resumes family life and establishes himself as a professional gambler. His younger brother, Billy, joins him and the pair became noted as dangerous men. Billy becomes a fugitive after killing William Burk, chief clerk in the office of United States Adjutant General of Texas, in an Austin bordello.

September 2, 1868—Ben quarrels with brother-in-law James Moore and shoots him, then threatens the justice of the peace if he tries to arrest him. He is arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to four years in the Huntsville, Texas penitentiary. Thompson enters prison on November 1, 1868, and is assigned number 1285. He receives a full pardon from President Ulysses Grant in 1870.

Spring 1871—Ben and Billy relocate to Abilene, Kansas. Ben establishes the Bull's Head Saloon and gambling den in partnership with Phil Coe, an old gambling pal from Texas. The pair are successful but while Ben is visiting in Kansas City, Coe is killed by City Marshal Wild Bill Hickok in a street fight. Thompson loses his investment as their agreement had been verbal. In Kansas City the Thompson family is involved in a buggy accident and Mrs. Thompson is badly injured, ultimately losing one arm. The Thompsons return to Texas to await the 1872 cattle shipping season.

1872-73—The Thompson brothers establish themselves in Wichita, Kansas, and Ben and Billy often appear in court for charges such as unlawfully carrying a pistol or being drunk and disorderly.

August 15, 1873—More serious trouble occurs when the Thompsons become embroiled in a street fight with "Happy Jack" Morco and John Sterling. In the verbal exchange, drunken Billy Thompson accidentally fires his shotgun, killing Sheriff C.B. Whitney, who is an unarmed witness. Billy remains a fugitive until his arrest by Texas Rangers near Austin in 1876. He is taken to Kansas for trial but is acquitted on September 14, 1877, the shooting deemed accidental.

December 25, 1876—During the cattle shipping seasons Ben makes his living gambling in the Kansas cow towns, of Wichita, Ellsworth, and Dodge City. During the off seasons he spends time with his family in Austin. Trouble is never far away; on Christmas Eve, Ben's friend, James Burdett, is thrown out of Mark Wilson's Capital Theater. Ben decides it is his fight also and on Christmas day Ben and Burdett create a disturbance in the theater, resulting in Wilson shooting at Ben but missing. He is then shot and killed by Ben. Ben is later-

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True West Legends

Ben Thompson

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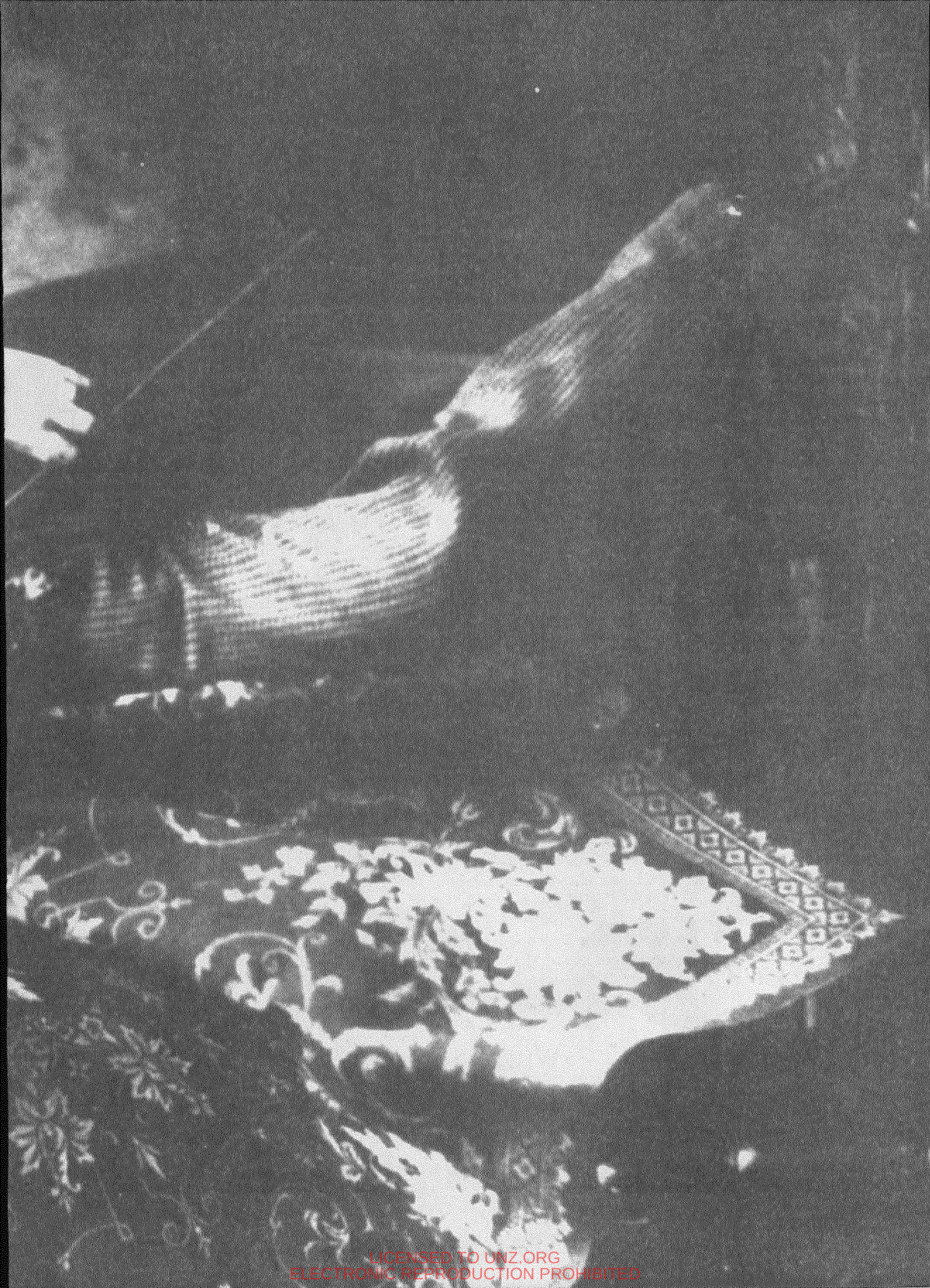

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tried for murder and found not guilty. Once again it is time to leave Texas for the cattle towns of Kansas.

March 1879—Thompson finds a new avenue for danger during the right-of-way "war" between the Santa Fe railroad and the Denver, Rio Grande and Western railroad. That March, the Santa Fe requests Sheriff Bat Masterson of Ford County, Kansas, to recruit an army of gunfighters to fight for its cause. Thompson becomes Masterson's first lieutenant in this bloodless war. Ultimately Masterson, or Thompson, surrenders the Santa Fe roundhouse to the DRG&W, effectively ending the "war."

December 1880—Thompson runs again for the position of city marshal of Austin, Texas, and is elected on December 14. He is very effective, and between his taking office and October 17, 1881, he and his force make a total of 1,200 arrests. With lawlessness down, Thompson occasionally gets drunk and is guilty of disturbing the peace.

July 1882—Thompson and his family visit San Antonio, taking a leave of absence from his duties as Austin city marshal. Thompson has three enemies in San Antonio—Jack Harris, Joseph C. Foster, and William H. Simms. Instead of avoiding the trio Ben chooses to visit their gambling establishment, entering the Harris Variety Theater on July 11. Words lead to gunfire and Harris misses but Thompson does not. Harris dies later that night and Ben is charged with murder. Although again Ben is acquitted of the charge he is forced to resign his Austin marshalship, the council accepting his resignation on October 23, 1882.

March 11, 1884—With the death of Harris, Joe Foster and Simms now control the Variety Theater. They realize that as long as Thompson lives their own lives are in danger. In March Thompson and his friend John King Fisher meet in Austin. Fisher is also a friend of Foster. The pair attempt to drink Austin dry but then decide to visit San Antonio. Perhaps Fisher wants to bring about a reconciliation between his two friends who are enemies. On March 11 the pair arrive in San Antonio by train. Thompson and Fisher are joined by William Simms and associate Jacob Coy, and later by Joe Foster.

About 11:00 PM, after considerable drinking, the group is in a friendly mood, at least outwardly. However, the ambush has been set up; Simms, Foster, and Coy back away from Fisher and Thompson just before two dozen shots are fired. When the smoke clears Fisher and Thompson are both dead, Foster has been wounded twice in the leg, and Coy is also wounded in the leg. Foster's leg is amputated but he dies on March 22.

Thompson, gambler-lawman, and Fisher, who was acting Uvalde County sheriff at the time, are taken to their respective homes and buried, Thompson in Oakwood Cemetery in Austin and Fisher in Uvalde Cemetery.

Billy Thompson was in San Antonio the night Ben was killed but apparently never attempted to avenge his brother's death.

WHAT TO READ:

Ben Thompson: Man With A Gun, by Floyd Benjamin Streeter.
Frederick Fell, Inc., 1957.
Famous Gunfghters of the Western Frontier, by Wm. B. "Bat" Masterson.
Originally printed in *Human Life* magazine in 1907.
The Life and Adventures of Ben Thompson, the Famous Texan, by William M. Walton.
Originally printed by Edwards and Church, Austin, 1884.
Dodge City: *The Cowboy Capital,* by Robert M. Wright.
Wichita Eagle Press, 1913.
The Gunfghters, by Dale T. Schoenberger.
Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1971.
Bat Masterson: The Man and the Legend, by Robert K. DeArment.
University of Oklahoma Press, 1979.

BILLY THOMPSON

WHERE TO GO:

Austin, Texas. The grave of Ben Thompson is kept neat and clean in the Oakwood Cemetery. A knee-high stone marks his grave. Stroll along Congress Avenue that leads to the capitol; this is where Ben Thompson patrolled during the 1880s when he was city marshal.

Dodge City, Kansas. Dodge retains much of the flavor of the cattle-trading days. Front Street has been built up to duplicate what it was like in the 1870s and 1880s.

Ellsworth, Kansas. Sheriff C.B. Whitney's grave is located in Ellsworth's cemetery, south of town.

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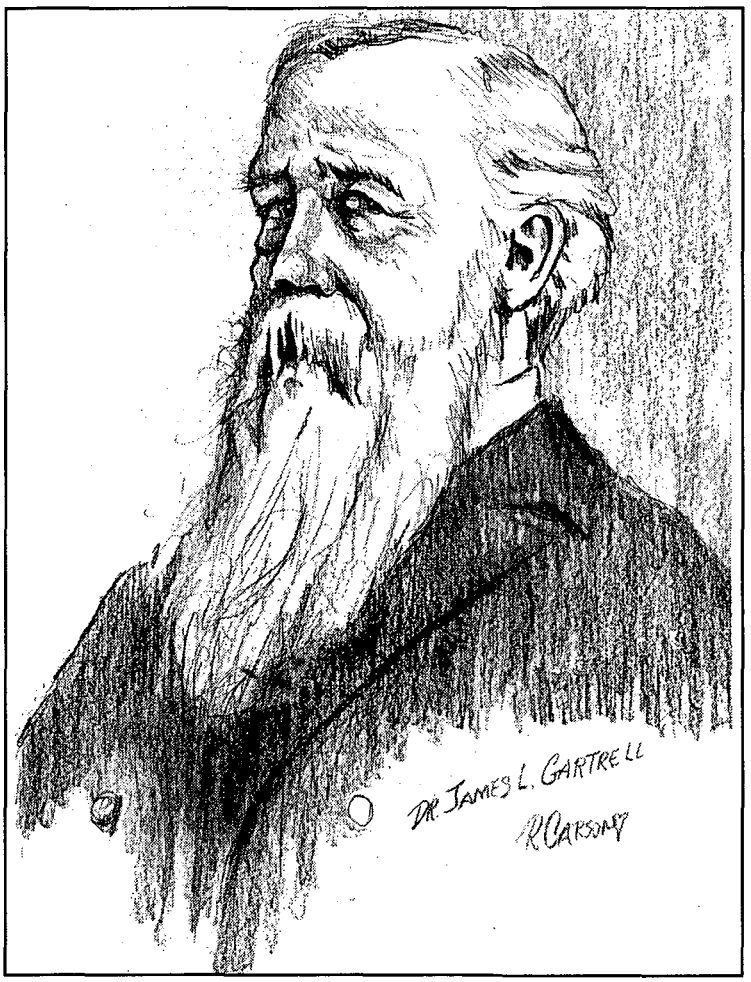
THE SHAME OF JUSTICE

A sense of shame and sympathy for all involved was the public declaration of the Butler *Daily Democrat* as it attempted to prepare the quiet country town of Butler, Missouri, for its second and last hanging. The date was April 17, 1903.

All precautions had been taken to prevent people with a sensitive nature and the shopkeepers on the town square from witnessing the gruesome duty of Sheriff Joe T. Smith as he carried out his official orders. The scaffold and stockade built by Thomas Hodges for the sum of $28.00, stood ready on the bright, sunny morning of the scheduled execution. Controversy over the hanging was such that the decision was made to raise the stockade to twenty feet around the area of the courthouse lawn.

Dr. James Gartrell had twice received stays of execution. The first, in February 1902, was granted pending an appeal to the United States Supreme Court. The second, in March 1903, was a thirty-day respite granted by Governor Alexander M. Dockery. During this thirty days, the Reverend Burroughs circulated a petition for commutation of the sentence.



When it was obvious that no intervention would be made in the execution, the sixty-eight year-old Dr. Gartrell experienced an emotional breakdown. The following morning, men, children, and a number of women filled the stockade to witness the well-publicized execution. Dr. Gartrell requested that he be allowed to walk unattended and that, once on the scaffold, he be able to address the public. However, at the scheduled time on the morning of the execution, Sheriff Smith announced that the doctor had experienced another breakdown and would appear shortly. At 9:51 AM, Gartrell, looking like Father Christmas, mounted the steps of the scaffold preceded by the Reverend Williamson and followed by deputies Spicer and Richardson. While the prisoner was being positioned on the trap door of the scaffold, the Reverend Williamson read a brief account of the life of the condemned man. Then another minister, the Reverend Jones, read from the Bible, Psalm 130, verses 1 to 6. Finally, a third clergyman, the Reverend Puckett, engaged in prayer. During the services Dr. Gartrell's stately, over six-foot frame stood straight as though at military attention. His eyes were fixed over the heads of the crowd to the north. His overall demeanor was that of proud gentry as he stood steady on the trap door. Occasionally he would raise one hand to smooth his immaculate beard over his well suited, barrel chest.

At 9:55 AM, in response to Sheriff Smith's question

BY SHEILA K. ALLEN • ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT CARSON

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as to whether he had anything to say, Gartrell began a nine and one-half minute speech. His tone remained low and controlled as he paused several times to collect his thoughts. The crowd remained quiet as the doctor graciously thanked his attorneys, the jail staff, and Sheriff Smith for their kindness and diligence during his confinement in the Butler jail. After thanking the churches for their prayers and the singers that often entertained him in jail, he again claimed self-defense in the murder of one D.B. Donegan and stated that he hoped to have been acquitted But, in his words. "I have convicted myself by my testimony."

Gartrell went on to state that he forgave all his enemies except one, but, mentioned no name. He further stated, "So far as being reconciled to give up this pitiful life, I have no regrets for myself, but, for my ten children." At the end of his speech he mentioned that he had once been hired as an executor and said of Sheriff Joe T. Smith, "I sympathize with my unfortunate friend who is now to perform this duty."

His final statement was to the people of Butler: "Now I thank you all for your presence here, in the interest of the law and of good citizenship; possibly some in sympathy for me. I thank you all."

The Reverend Williamson again stepped forward and prayed briefly with Gartrell. Then, like the gentleman that he was, the doctor shook hands with those about him speaking words of friendship, gratitude, and farewell to each.

The events leading up to the execution began in early March 1901, when miner D.B. Burns Donegan left Victor, Colorado. He had about $800 and various shares of mining stock in his possession. He had a restless, western spirit and was among the many that helped to open the west and mining districts therein. He was then on his way to Indian Territory, via Missouri.

Once in Kansas City, Donegan met up with Dr. James Gartrell and his son Will. Gartrell spoke of his wife's leaving him because of his previous addiction to whisky and opium. He was currently posing as a model for art students at a local art institute, for twenty-five cents an hour. The two men discussed going to Oklahoma Territory and starting anew. Donegan, tired of traveling alone, agreed to front Gartrell traveling funds for himself and his son. The doctor agreed to repay the funds to Donegan once in Oklahoma Territory.

On March 16, 1901, Donegan, James Gartrell, and Will Gartrell appeared at the Dinkey horse market in Kansas City where they purchased a team of horses, harness, and a covered wagon. Donegan paid with three $100 bills and was given a receipt. The three then left the city going south.

ON MARCH 18, 1901, after stopping in Amoret, Missouri, for some supplies the trio continued south and west.

On this second day of the trip, Will Gartrell later testified, his father and Donegan exchanged bitter words over the rights of the South and North and over religious issues. Donegan reportedly was extremely angry and became disagreeable, treating both the boy and the elder Gartrell badly from that time on. It was about this time as well that young Will Gartrell became violently ill with what later would be revealed as small pox. That night, Dr. Gartrell and Will were compelled to sleep in a corn field instead of the wagon. The weather was miserably cold and Donegan refused them blankets.

On March 19, 1901, with Will Gartrell feverish and weak, they stopped at an abandoned cabin. During the night, as Will slept on the floor of the cabin, Gartrell and Donegan again argued. Donegan once more refused Gartrell covers to sleep and insisted on him leaving the cabin. Donegan said that Gartrell's stoking the fire was keeping him awake. Gartrell went outside into the bitter cold only to return to the warmth of the cabin about thirty minutes later. The quarrel resumed and Donegan lunged at Gartrell with a monkey wrench. Picking up an ax, Gartrell struck Donegan's head, crushing his skull.

James Gartrell woke his son, who, upon realizing what had happened, fainted. When Will came to, it was morning and Donegan's body had been wrapped in sacks and oil cloth.

Hitching the team, the father and son traveled for miles. At one place, along Mulberry Creek, the bloody ax was thrown in the water and finally the body as well.

Driving to Nyhart, Missouri, where he gave his name as Johnson, Dr. Gartrell and his son took a train to Kansas City, using some of the $260 that the elder Gartrell had removed from Donegan's body. Once in Kansas City, Will was sent to a hospital in Emporia, Kansas, while his father returned to the local horse market to sell the team and wagon.

Detectives Halderman and Kenney just happened to be present when Gartrell submitted the receipt with Donegan's name on it as evidence to his purchasing the team and wagon from the dead man. He requested that someone be sent for the horses and wagon.

After sending inquiries out along the route that Donegan and the two Gartrells had traveled, the detectives learned that when the waters of Mulberry Creek had receded, midway between Nyhart and Amoret, a badly decomposed left arm had been spotted. Upon further investigation, D.B. Donegan's body was recovered. Sheriff Joe T. Smith was notified of the arrest of James Gartrell in Kansas City in connection with the Donegan murder. Accompanied by Prosecuting Attorney Horn, Sheriff Smith went to Kansas City and returned within a week to Butler, Missouri, with Gartrell. In the meantime Gartrell had made his confession.

During his confinement it was documented that Gartrell had been born of a Virginia father and a Kentucky mother. Thecouple married in Kentucky and then moved to Missouri, where James Gartrell was born in 1835 near Fulton, Calaway County. As a young adult James

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lived in Macon, St. Joseph, and Lexington, Missouri, until the Civil War. He joined an independent Confederate company under Captain Poindexter. He fought at Monroe City and again at Wilson Creek, both in Missouri. Afterward he became a regular soldier in the Confederate army and was discharged when time was out. He did not re-enlist on account of poor health. Instead, he moved to Ohio where he studied medicine for several years.

Returning to Missouri, Gartrell married, but, his first wife lived for only thirteen months after they were wed. They had one child. He then married a woman from Mexico, Missouri. They had nine children and were together many happy years before she too died. After taking a third wife, he became addicted to opiates and whiskey and she eventually left him.

Gartrell moved to Texas where he figured prominently for many years, owned 3,000 acres of land, and grazed a large number of sheep. He was associated with Colonel Void Cockrell in business and served in the state legislature and as a sheriff for a short term. He also filled other positions when necessary. At one time he was sent with another prominent Texan to Washington to induce Congress to appropriate $300,000 to deepen Aransas Pass harbor. He succeeded in his mission.

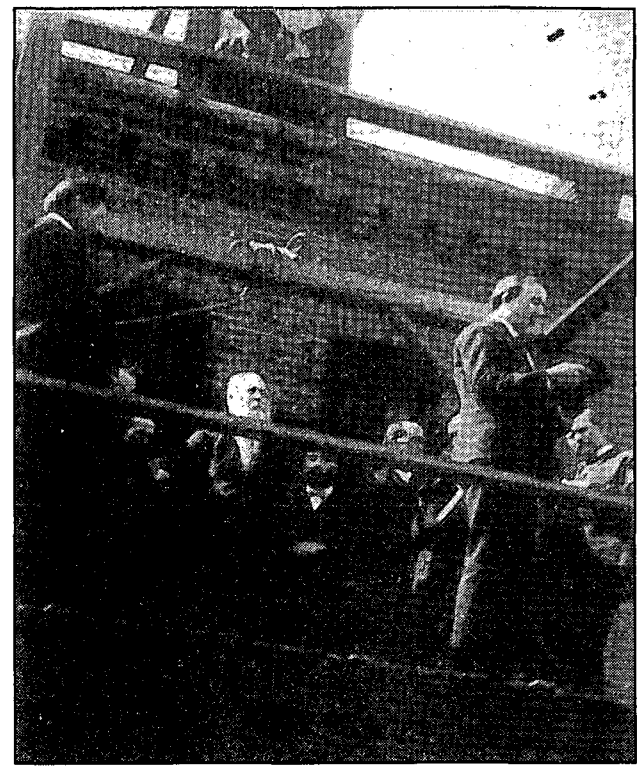
While in Ohio, William McKinley and he became friends. When McKinley became president,he offered Gartrell the position of census enumerator of Texas. Gartrell, however, did not have ready funds to operate and he had to decline. He took a position in a hospital in Havana harbor. En route, Gartrell got as far as Norfolk, Virginia, before his addictions got the better of him. After going on an opium and whiskey binge, he lost his position.

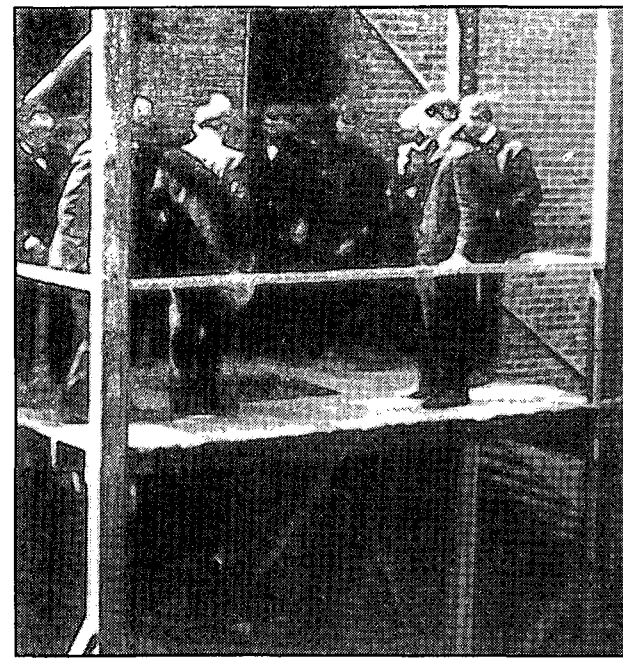
Eventually he made his way back to Kansas City where he met D.B. Donegan.

At 10:07 on the morning of April 17, 1903, Sheriff Smith, assisted by deputies McCann, Spicer, and Richardson, placed the rope around the doctor's neck and the black hood over his head in preparation for execution. At 10:09 the sheriff drew the key to the trap. The gallows shuttered as the loud, rumble of the trap mechanism vib-rated over the gasping crowd and the gentle, grandfatherly soul of Dr. Gartrell plunged into eternity. As though true to his statement of being ready for death, there was not the faintest struggle. The doctor's death came instantly.

Gartrell was pronounced dead at 10:27 by Doctors Williams and Grosshart. His lifeless body was immediately placed into a waiting coffin that had been covered with a blanket and placed under the steps of the scaffold.

The coffin was placed into a waiting wagon and taken to the local cemetery for burial. Numerous carriages followed the doctor to his final resting place.





Courtesy Ed Herrmann

The hanging of Dr. James Gartrell, at Butler, Missouri, April 17, 1903.

Dr.Gartrell was the last person to be executed in the town of Butler, Missouri. The history of his case, because of the circumstances of his conviction, is still displayed in the local museum and discussed as though it happened last week.

It was the opinion of many that Dr. Gartrell should have been acquitted. The local people fought to free him until the end. The local newspaper, the Butler *Daily Democrat*, best reflected the sentiments of the town in an article the day following the hanging. It stated, "The hanging could not be without its depressing effect upon every one in the community. The *Democrat* had its sympathies aroused to the utmost and sincerely regretted that it must be."

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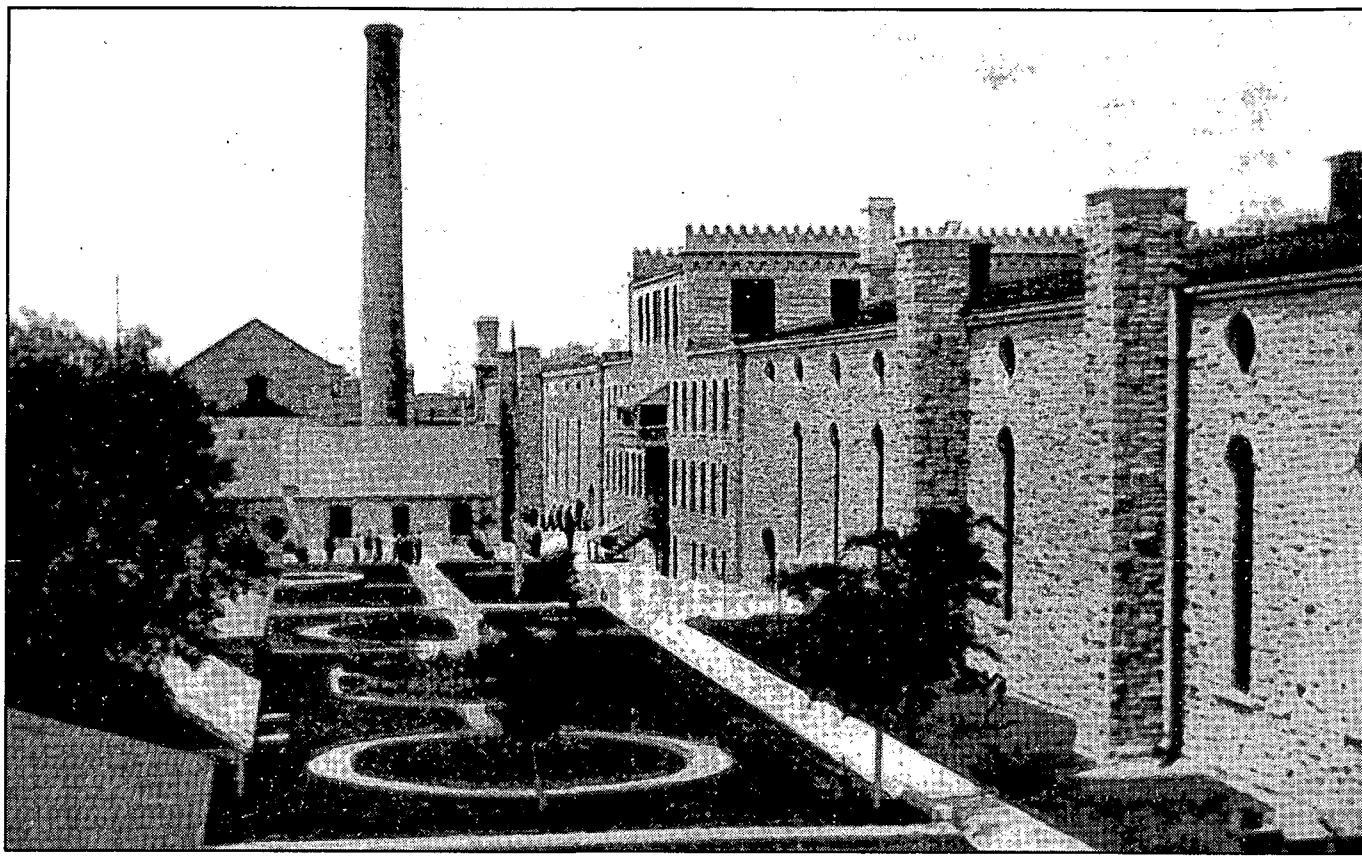
Mutiny at the Pen

By Shirley Gilfert



Nebraska State Historical Society

The Nebraska State Penitentiary courtyard.

Prison riots are as old as prisons themselves. It's not uncommon for a band of murderers and thieves to take control of the prison arsenal and make hostages of the guards. But when one woman manages not only to control this situation, but also to convince the rebels to surrender to her,...well, that's news. Yet in the Nebraska State Penitentiary at Lincoln, on January 11, 1875, that's exactly what happened.

The mutiny was instigated by Nebraska badman George "Mac" McWaters. McWaters had terrorized southeastern Nebraska for years and had gunned down at least three men in bar room brawls. After being pursued all across the country by a tenacious Otoe County sheriff, he was finally apprehended in Sacramento, California, and returned to Nebraska City. There he was tried and found guilty of killing a local doctor and sentenced to twenty-one years in the state penitentiary.

When McWaters arrived at the penitentiary to begin his sentence, he found an old buddy waiting for him. Quinn Bohannon had been part of a gang of horse thieves led by McWaters that had operated in southeast Nebraska and Missouri. Bohannon stole one too many horses and got caught. He was sent up for four years.

It didn't take these two long to put their heads together and come up with a plan for breaking out. They managed to persuade five other men to join them in their plot and then waited patiently for the right time to execute it. In the meantime, they familiarized themselves with every facet of prison routine so they could select the most propitious time for escape.

When he learned Warden William Woodhurst was out of the building on that cold January day, McWaters decided to put his plan into action. Warden Woodhurst made rounds every day at 4:00 PM. Because he was gone for the day, it fell to the deputy warden, C.J. Nobes, to take his place. The deputy warden was an important figure in McWaters' scheme.

The seven conspirators were working in the prison workshop, which was actually the old prison building located just across the yard

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from the newly-completed main building that housed the prisoners. McWaters watched the time carefully. A few minutes before the deputy warden was due to appear in the workshop, the seven men overpowered their guard and tied him up.

When the deputy warden entered a few minutes later, he too was seized, tied up, and robbed of his clothes and his keys. McWaters was approximately the same size and build as the deputy warden, so he planned to masquerade as Nobes until he could gain access to the main building. They needed civilian clothes and weapons and they would find both in the main building.

After McWaters donned the deputy warden's clothes, he realized he had a minor problem. Nobes sported a beard but McWaters was clean-shaven. Undaunted, McWaters applied a fake beard with a piece of charcoal he found in the shop. From a distance he could now pass for Nobes.

Now it was time for phase two of his plan. Leaving three of his cohorts in the shop to guard the deputy warden, McWaters lined up the other four, plus the captured guard, in single file and standard prison formation, with each man placing his right hand on the man in front of him. With McWaters acting as file leader, they marched toward the main building. The guard in the northeast tower spotted them at once but assumed it was only the deputy warden leading the men into the building for some special reason, so he took no action.

Once safely across the prison yard, the next hurdle was to get inside the main building. The guard at this door also assumed McWaters was the deputy warden and opened up for him without question. As soon as they were inside, the convicts overpowered and took him as another hostage.

So far so good. Now they must get to the armory on the second floor where they could obtain some weapons. They planned to use the captured guards as a shield, shoot the guard in the southwest tower behind the prison, and then make a dash toward the rear wall of the prison yard. This wall was the only one made of wood and would be easily penetrated, or so they thought. They had not reckoned on running into the warden's wife.

Even though she was later described by the newspapers as a "lady of femininity, grace, dignity, and kindness," she had faced mobs in her husband's absence on two previous occasions. Where women of that era were expected to swoon from terror, this woman was not your typical Victorian lady. She kept her wits about her and her "femininity" proved to be a more powerful weapon than those prison carbines.

Mrs. Woodhurst had remained at home that day when the warden took their sons on an outing. The family lived in an apartment located near the warden's private office on the second floor of the building. When she heard a racket in the second floor hallway, she exited her apartment into the warden's office where she could see out into the hall.

By this time the convicts had succeeded in arming themselves with weapons from the armory. When the woman was spotted in the office doorway McWaters quietly ordered her to go back into her apartment and not interfere.

The lovely lady obeyed, almost! She re-entered her own apartment, found a window close enough to the northwest turret that she could communicate with the guard stationed there, and called out to him, informing him of the events inside and directing him to tell the guards in the other turrets to stay out of the main building.

This changed the situation for the mutineers considerably. Every exit would now be covered by a guard with a carbine, and it would not be quite so easy to make that dash across the prison yard.

While the four convicts inside the main building were busy locating arms, the men who had been left to guard Deputy Warden Nobes in the workshop had run into a little problem. They were so concerned with watching for a signal from McWaters that they forgot to keep a sharp eye on the deputy warden. Nobes worked loose his bonds and grabbed a piece of rubber hose that lay nearby. He began swinging it so violently that the three convicts fled from the workshop in terror and joined their cohorts in the main building. That left Nobes free to sound the alarm throughout the city.

The reaction in the streets of Lincoln on that wintry day when shoppers saw a man with no coat and no shoes riding bareback at breakneck speed down Eleventh Street, shouting "Mutiny at the pen! Mutiny at the pen!" must have been surprising. Men who heard him dropped what they were doing, grabbed whatever weapon was available to them, and headed straight for the penitentiary, surrounding it on all sides until troops from Fort Omaha could arrive.

Rumors flew throughout the city after Nobes' dramatic ride. When a train pulled into the Missouri Pacific Station, passengers were informed that McWaters and fifty other convicts had broken jail and were on their way to the railroad station. What's more, this report said, they planned to capture the train for their getaway. Panic reigned until the train steamed out of town.

Meanwhile, back at the pen, our heroine was creating one problem after another for McWaters' crew. When citizens began arriving from downtown to surround the prison, the rebels inside the building spotted them from the windows and leveled their weapons to fire on them. Mrs. Woodhurst threw up the window sash and called out, "Get back! Get back!" Then she turned to face the convicts and issued an order, "Don't you dare fire! Put down your guns."

The men, like naughty boys caught stealing from the cookie jar, immediately lowered their guns. Whether it was her commanding voice or her heaving bosom is not

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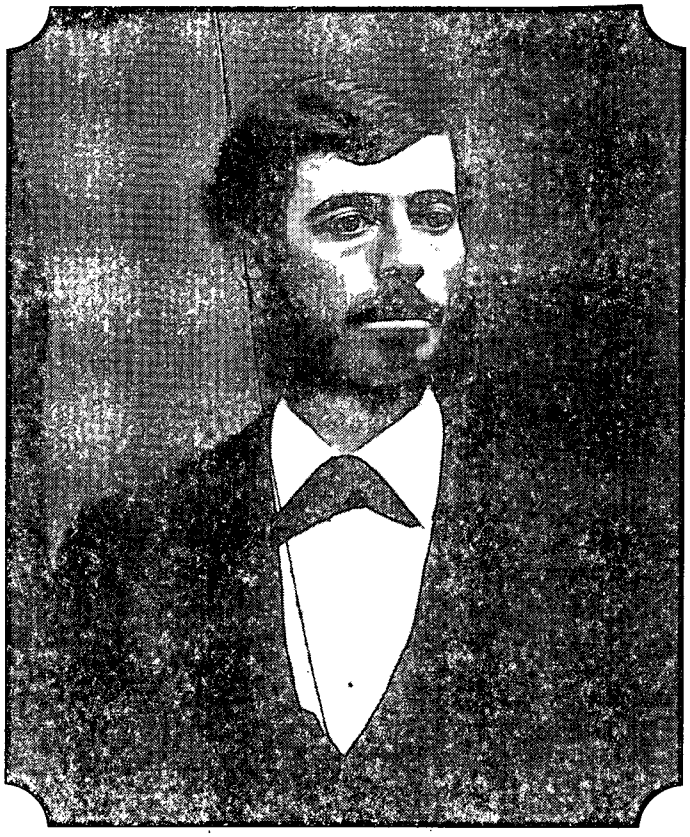

Nebraska State Historical Society

Nebraska State Penitentiary Warden William Woodhurst and Deputy Warden C.J. Nobes.

recorded, but something certainly awed those men enough to make them obey her command.

The convicts had still not found enough civilian clothing to outfit them for their escape, so they proceeded to go through a storage room seeking coats and shoes. Mrs. Woodhurst again issued orders concerning what they could use and what they couldn't. One of the men attempted to put on a coat belonging to her husband. She demanded he take it off at once, which he did. At one point she told one of the men, "Leave those shoes alone. You can take my shoes if they will fit you but you cannot have those."

While the men were distracted with outfitting themselves, Mrs. Woodruff hid their weapons in her wardrobe and put their extra ammunition in a bucket of water. When they finally realized the weapons were missing, McWaters swore at her.

She was hardly intimidated. Her response was, "Mr. McWaters, all the rest of the boys have treated me like a gentleman should, but this is not gentlemanly treatment and you must stop it."

McWaters must have been stunned. He had killed at least three men at the drop of a hat, and this snip of a woman dared to correct his manners! He mumbled that she wasn't so much. He had a wife at home who was just as good as she was. Mrs. Woodhurst heard him and responded, "I pity the woman who has so ungentlemanly a husband."

Eventually, when Mrs Woodhurst saw these men attempting to break into her wardrobe to get their weapons back, she surrendered the key that unlocked it, but she continued to signal to the outside guards at every opportunity.

Several times during late afternoon and early evening, the mutineers tried to get out of the building. Each effort brought a volley of gunfire from the towers and the prisoners would beat a hasty retreat back inside the building. McWaters decided they needed an alternate plan. Suppose they put the captured guards into prison uniforms and forced them to walk in front of them? This should cause enough confusion to give them time to make a break for that wooden wall.

Just before dark, Mrs. Woodhurst again appeared at a window in the chapel, a room near the main entrance of the building. She was able to convey McWaters "alternate plan" to the men outside.

When McWaters discovered the warden's wife had again foiled his plans, he told her, "Mrs. Woodhurst, we cannot have you deviling around in this manner. If you don't stop it, we'll put you forward and rush out after."

Mrs. Woodhurst replied, "I just dare you to try it."

McWaters' answer showed the effect she was having on all men when he replied, "You are the pluckiest woman I ever saw. I admire your pluck. It suits me."

The idea of using her as a human shield was not an idle threat. The men kicked it around for awhile, for they were sure the guards wouldn't fire on the warden's wife. But they discarded the idea because they

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didn't want to risk hurting her either.

Never did the men tie up Mrs. Woodhurst or lay a hand on her in any way. She was allowed to go back to her apartment to spend the night but was instructed not to light a lamp. She lit two of them and kept them burning all night.

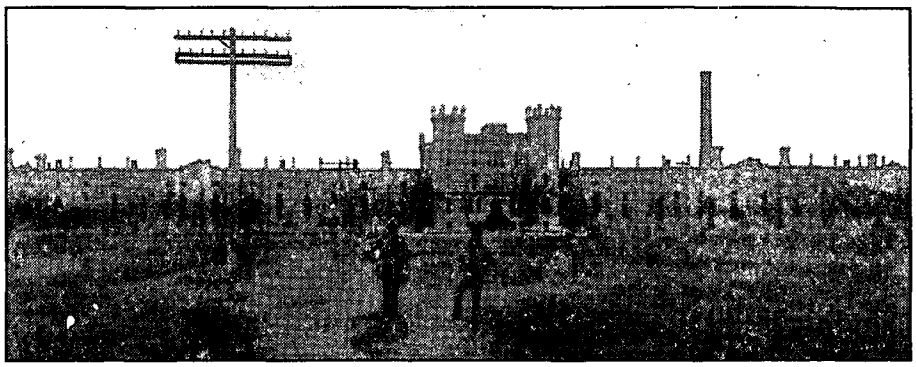
The conspirators spent most of their night trying to figure out how they were going to get out of the building. They didn't know until daybreak that soldiers from Fort Omaha had arrived and were now preparing to attack from the south entrance in order to force the men out of their refuge. The other prisoners had been housed in the workshop all night and had caused no problems at all. Warden Woodhurst and his sons waited anxiously outside the gates.

Around 6:00 AM on the morning of January 12, Mrs. Woodhurst again appeared at the southwest window. She talked with her husband and sons, assuring them she had not been harmed in any way. She said she thought she could get the mutineers to surrender to her. Would they let her try before troops rushed the building?

It was agreed to give her time to make the effort before more drastic measures were taken. She then went in to where the convicts had passed the night and said, "Now boys, you may kill me, and you may kill the guards you have under your control, and you can hold out in here for some time, but in the end there is only one alternative. You must surrender or die and you had better surrender."

By this time all seven men knew she was right. They agreed to surrender to her, stipulating only that there should not be excessive punishment for what they had done. Mrs. Woodhurst then led them quietly out into the hands of the law.

McWaters spoke to the waiting warden. "Warden, there is no mincing matters. You are an old prison officer and you know how it is. I have no ill will toward you. You treated me well, but I am like any other man...I want my liberty. I thought I had a chance to gain it and I improved on it. I got the better of you at first, but the fates were against me. I lost my chance. Now you have the advantage and I give up and surrender."



Nebraska State Historical Society

The Nebraska State Penitentiary, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Unfortunately for McWaters, the agreement concerning no excessive punishment did not apply to him. Since he was the ringleader of the revolt, he was kept shackled in solitary confinement except while working on the rockpile.

He was visited in May of that same year by a reporter from the *Nebraska City News*, his home town newspaper, who said McWaters was hardly recognizable. Gone was the steely-eyed confidence that had terrorized so many citizens in the past. McWaters seemed ready to crack emotionally, sometimes laughing, then bursting into tears a moment later. He voiced concern for his wife, who was having financial difficulties, and he pleaded with the county to help her. He also said he hoped to get a new trial, but the reporter told him his chances for that were hopeless.

Less than two weeks after the reporter's visit, McWaters made the headlines again. The official story was that he had been killed in another escape attempt. Supposedly his plot had been discovered and all guards alerted to this possibility. When an argument broke out among the men working in the prison yard, the guard on duty determined it was a planned distraction. McWaters approached the guard in his cage, then stopped and bent over to pick up some rocks. The guard assumed the prisoner was about to stone him and fired on him. McWaters died a few minutes later in the prison hospital.

A day or so later, the *Nebraska City News* received a letter from a convict who had just been discharged from the state peniteniary after serving a two-year sentence. The letter writer maintained McWaters had been deliberately murdered while "sitting in the water closet reading the paper." He also stated that more than twenty inmates were willing to swear to this. An editorial appearing the same day the letter was printed stated:

> To tell people than any man is going to throw a stone at a man who sits in a cage with both his hands on a carbine ready to shoot is a story that cannot be very well taken in...Taking all things into consideration, it is hardly possible that the shooting of McWaters was a necessity...We look at this deed as very bad management which should not be sanctioned by our people.

Despite the ex-convict's letter and this editorial, no investigation was held into the matter. State history records only that McWaters lost his life during an escape attempt, and it seems the only one who grieved was his widow. Everyone else breathed a sigh of relief.

Editor's Note: A detailed look at the life and crimes of George McWaters will appear in the January 1998 issue of *True West*.

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Central Oregon was an unwholesome place at Christmas in 1882. The entire region between the Cascades and the Ochoco Mountains had fallen under the control of big stockmen who had formed themselves into a gang of self-styled "vigilantes." And during a single night that season several gruesome murders elevated the gang's power by frightening into deeper silence some of those few who were tempted to oppose them.

A Night of Murders in OLD PRINEVILLE

BY DAVID BRALY

Formally known as the Ochoco Livestock Association, the vigilantes had committed their first murders in March when they shot to death an accused killer named Lucius Langdon. Langdon was in chains at the time. He had been under arrest at Prineville, Oregon, in the hotel lobby where deputies were waiting for dawn and the arrival of the stage that would take him to The Dalles for trial. Only minutes after they had killed Langdon, the vigilantes also murdered Langdon's hired man, W.H. Harrison, although he was innocent of any crime or transgression. They dragged him to death behind a horse and then hanged his body from the Crooked River bridge.

There had been other activity since then, including cold-blooded murder and widespread intimidation of potential opponents. The vigilantes claimed that they only wanted to stop horse thefts and cattle rustling. Not true, said critics after the terror was over. They said that stock thieves were not among the vigilantes' victims, but instead individual vigilantes had used the organization to protect themselves when they murderously settled personal scores against innocent men.

By December 1882, the vigilantes were in complete control of central Oregon. A few men spoke out against them, notably James Blakely, Al Schwartz, John Combs, Sam Smith, and Steve Staats. Most who did protest were mailed skull-and-crossbones notes ordering them to cease. Others, like Staats, were later murdered by the gang.

But before Staats went down, the vigilantes went after Al Schwartz.

Schwartz was an early settler in the region, having moved there in the mid-1870s. He ranched on Mill Creek, several miles east of Prineville, where he lived with his wife and three small children. In a recently published letter, written in 1883, a woman whose family homesteaded nearby claimed that Schwartz was intelligent and a good neighbor, but suspected of leading a gang of horse thieves. James Blakely later described him as an outspoken man who had condemned the vigilantes for murdering young Harrison.

In either case, the vigilantes represented a very real threat to Schwartz. He didn't appear to worry much about their confronting him face-to-face, but knew that they had a habit of back-shooting and murdering unarmed men.

One cold night just before Christmas, his confidence became the death of him.

Schwartz strolled into Henry Burmeister's saloon in Prineville. Some vigilantes were there, playing cards, and about ten o'clock they invited him to join them. In the small town of a few hundred people, the vigilantes and their adversaries were on a first-name basis, so the invitation in itself was probably not unusual. Schwartz sat down with them, but was careful to take a chair facing the door, his back to the wall. He wasn't going to take a chance of anyone getting the drop on him.

Unfortunately, there was a window in the wall. Schwartz himself noticed a draft. "Why is that window up?" he asked. "It's cold."

He rose and shut the window, then sat down again. Just then a man who had been waiting outside

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fired two shots through the window. Schwartz was hit twice in the head and died instantly. Another account says that he was shot through the throat and was carried to the hotel, where he died later in the night.

That same cold evening, two young men staying on the Schwartz ranch were lured to the cabin of W.C. Barnes, a son of Elisha Barnes, a prominent pioneer and founder of the Mill Creek community, the first mayor of Prineville, and president of the Ochoco Livestock Association. The two boys were Sid Huston and jockey Charles Luster.

Suddenly vigilantes rushed inside to grab them. Huston apparently got off a shot and wounded one of the men. But the gang overcame them. They took the boys to a large juniper tree, put ropes around their necks, and lynched them. Gang members then shot them in the head. Their bodies were discovered the following morning by James Blakely and Sam Smith.

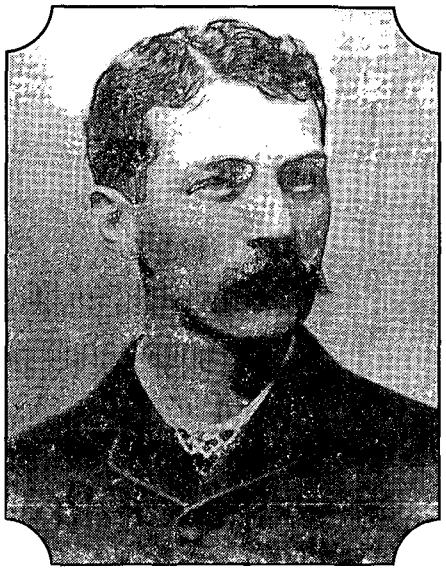
The vigilantes claimed that Schwartz was a horse thief and that Luster had been planning to steal some horses. They told people that Luster and Huston had admitted being horse thieves before they were lynched and had named confederates, who, alas, had escaped.

The Portland *Oregonian* ran a front page article about the murders which appears to have been written by one of the vigilantes. Possibly it was. Bud Thompson, one of the vigilante chiefs, ranched in Crook County but earlier had been a newspaper editor in western Oregon.

TRIPLE LYNCHING
ONE HORSE THIEF SHOT
AND TWO
HUNG AT PRINEVILLE.
The Stock Raisers of Eastern
Oregon, Robbed
by Organized Bands of Outlaws,
Forced
to Administer Punishment.
SPECIAL DISPATCH TO THE
OREGONIAN.

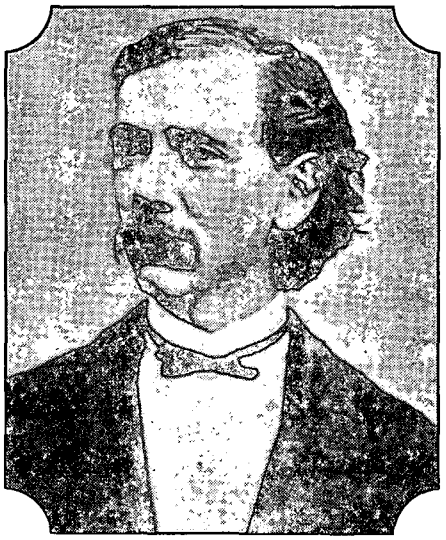
DALLES, Or. Dec. 27—From a correspondence from Prinevlle dated Dec. 24th. to the *Times-Mountaineer* of this city the following particulars of the lynching in Prineville in Crook county are obtained: For several years the stock raisers of that section and of Beaver Creek have complained bitterly of the frequent raids of horse thieves. During the last two years it has been estimated that nearly 500 head of horses have been stolen. About two weeks ago a drove of about thirty head was taken from Prineville past Mitchell and turned over to accomplices in the John Day country. This stealing has been done by organized bands of thieves whose members are scattered throughout Eastern Oregon. Their mode of operation is for the resident thieves to gather up a band of horses, drive them thirty or forty miles and turn them over to their confederates, who in turn would drive them to the next station and so on, while the first would return home and be able to show they had never left the neighborhood. As they are so well organized and so perfectly acquainted with the country, capture and convictions have been almost an utter impossibility. But the stock men it seems have organized little by little and have picked up evidence showing who the thieves were. At last the capture of some of the weakest of the band and a judicious use of the rope has brought out of full confession as to who the members are.

Last night our town was shocked and horrified by the shooting of A.C. Swartz and the hanging of Sid Huston and Chas. Luster. Swartz and one John Thorp are alleged to have been the leaders of the thieves here. Swartz in some way knew the business had leaked out and he came into town and boasted of his party's strength and said whoever "batted their eyes" he would shoot them. That evening while sitting at a table in Burmeister's saloon he was shot through the neck, his assailant standing outside and shooting through the window. The same



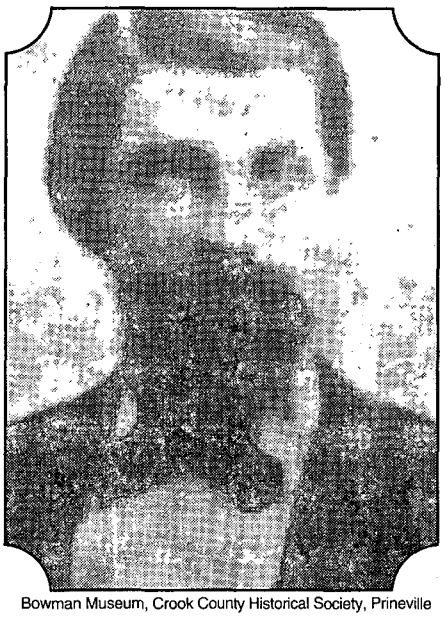
Bowman Museum, Crook County Historical Society, Prineville

James Blakely.



Author's collection

William "Bud" Thompson.



Bowman Museum, Crook County Historical Society, Prineville

Hank Vaughn.

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night a band of masked men broke into W.C. Barnes' house and captured Sid Huston and Chas. Luster and took them about a mile and hung them to a Juniper tree. Huston was also shot once through the head and Luster twice. Who the executioners are is only a matter of conjecture and horrible as it seems the act appears to meet the hearty approval of the entire community. The rest of the band who have so successfully worked this section, John Thorp, Price Thorp and James Townsend, have escaped but the vigilantes are on their tracks and by the time this reaches you their days of stealing may be over.

Bud Thompson's later account of the night's events veered even further from reality.

"Along in January, about the 10th, as I remember," wrote Thompson in his autobiography, "a crowd of the rustlers came to town, and after filling up with bad whiskey rode up and down the streets, pistols in hand, and declared they could take the town and burn it, and would do so 'if there was any monkey business.' Little attention was paid to them, people going about their business, apparently unconcerned. But that night there was 'monkey business.' Three of the gang were hung to a juniper two miles above town, while another was shot and killed in town. The next morning notices were found posted, and skull and crossbones attached, telling all hard characters to leave the county. There was then such a hegira as has seldom been witnessed. Men not before suspicioned skipped the country. They stood not upon the order of their going, but went—and went in a hurry. Among them was an ex-Justice of the Peace."

"...a crowd of the rustlers came to town, and after filling up with bad whiskey rode up down the streets, pistols in hand, and declared they could take the town and burn it, and would do so 'if there was any monkey business.'"

"Nothing of the kind had really happened," was James Blakely's later observation on Thompson's account.

Blakely said that the decent people in Crook County were outraged by the murders but "most of them were afraid to even talk out loud."

Writing to her mother in early January, Crook County resident Kate Robbins described Sid Huston as a kind man who had gotten into the wrong company and had become reckless. She observed that about the same time as the murders another man had been found shot to death in the hills. Also, someone had shot at one man through a window, and John and Price Thorp were suspects. Sheriff George Churchill was riding in pursuit of the Thorps on the theory that they had tried to kill the man because they believed he was a vigilante. She doesn't name the suspected vigilante.

But Blakely said years later that the real reason the vigilantes had murdered Luster and his friend Huston was that Luster had refused vigilante orders to throw a race. A history written about two decades after the murders said basically the same thing, claiming that Luster had bet $60 on his own horse and won, despite vigilante orders to lose.

Not only did they kill the jockey and his friend, they also took it hard that another man had won so much of their money betting on the jockey's horse. The man was Hank Vaughn, a tall and dapperly-dressed professional gambler who had a wide reputation as a gunfighter. It has been claimed that Bud Thompson persuaded Charley Long to avenge the vigilante losses by killing Vaughn.

Long, a handsome young man with a keen sense of humor, is alleged to have committed only one previous illegal act. That happened when he busted a fiddle over the head of the fellow playing it, for which, it was said, people who had heard the man's music were grateful. But Long is also alleged to have been a devoted follower of Bud Thompson's.

The Vaughn-Long gunfight followed an argument in Til Glaze's saloon. There are several versions of it, including one in which each man took an end of a single bandanna with one hand and drew his gun with the other. Actually, according to Blakely, they simply walked out into the middle of the floor and drew their pistols. Long shot Vaughn in the scalp and left breast, while Vaughn shot Long three times in the shoulder. Both men recovered.

In the days that followed the lynching, people noticed that blacksmith W.C. Foren wasn't seen around town. Vigilantes prevented anyone from going into his house to visit him. They said that he had been kicked by a horse and was in bed. Foren died. The word went around that Foren had been a vigilante and that the shot Huston got off before being grabbed had done its job. Foren had also been a deputy marshal, one of the men charged with guarding Langdon the previous winter.

No one was ever punished for the murders of Schwartz, Huston, and Luster. The identities of the killers were never made public. Today the murders are overshadowed in local history by those that the vigilantes committed before and after.

The vigilantes remained in power for more than a year longer. Eventually, seventy-five to eighty men organized to fight them, led by James Blakely. After the vigilantes were driven out of county offices in the 1884 election, some fled the region and the remainder learned to abide by the law, which was now represented by Sheriff James Blakely and Deputy John Combs.

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THE MYTH OF THE PLUMMER GANG

BY DAVID CURRAN

Soon after dusk had settled over the snow and pine covered hills, a large group of men armed with shotguns surrounded the cabin of James and Martha Vail in what is now Bannack, Montana, on January 10, 1864. Answering a knock, Mrs. Vail greeted a neighbor, who asked to see the sheriff, Martha's brother-in-law. Sheriff Henry Plummer, thirty-two, just shy of six feet tall, and rail thin as most consumptives are, had been lying ill in bed. He rose and went unarmed to the door.

The blond, blue-gray-eyed Plummer was the sheriff of the Idaho Territory, extending from Bannack's diggings at the Beaverhead to Alder Gulch's Virginia and Nevada City. When Martha became alarmed at seeing the armed men, Plummer assured Martha that it was all right. Once the sheriff was outside, however, the men stood around as if purposeless. Actually, only four vigilantes had come into town, and they had a hard time getting recruits for their dirty work. Finally, they thrust shotguns into the hands of passersby and ordered them to come. The well-liked and respected sheriff, seeing his neighbors' confusion and misunderstanding their intention, went to the cabin of Wilbur Fisk Sanders and knocked on the door. To his surprise the light in the Sanders' cabin went out. In a moment Sanders emerged and ordered the men to "Get on with it." The men seized Plummer. Two other groups were rounding up Plummer's two deputies. The groups met and sixty men began marching the three to the gallows Plummer had himself built on the outskirts of town.

By the two limbless pines with a crosspiece on top, the circle of armed men kept the captives surrounded. At the edge of the circle guns faced outward, lest Plummer's supporters try to save him. Plummer's two deputies, Buck Stinson and Ned Ray, were hung first. Though writer Thomas Dimsdale, himself a vigilante, claims that Plummer broke down, saying he was too evil to die and begged for his life, other witnesses say no such confession occurred.

Plummer, remaining calm, asked for a trial, and when denied that, for a chance to arrange his affairs. Again the leaders said no. In the

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end, Plummer said only that he had done nothing wrong. Although other vigilante victims had been given a hearing that passed for trial, Plummer was refused even an opportunity to pray. Seeing a friend from the Vail household crying, Plummer took off his scarf and asked one of the men to give it to the boy, Joseph Swift. As the men fitted the noose around Plummer's neck he made his last request. "Give me a good drop, boys?" Four days later Bannack became part of the new Territory of Montana.

Myths about Plummer, about how he led an outlaw gang at the same time that he was a sheriff, have circulated for over 100 years. Movies exploiting that myth, such as the 1952 movie, *Montana Territory,* have been made about him. Books, such as Will Henry's 1958 novel, *Reckoning at Yankee Flat,* have delved into his long supposed evil duplicity. The bad sheriff who appears to uphold the law while secretly supporting a crime ring for profit has added spice to the western genre. However, as Plummer biographers R.E. Mather and F.E. Boswell have pointed out, Plummer may have been guilty of no more than being so popular as to get in the way of Montana's first territorial governor, Sidney Edgerton, and Edgerton's nephew, Wilbur Fisk Sanders.

The Bannack Plummer rode into in 1862 paid good wages. Mines produced as much as $2,500 in three hours. However, Mrs. Emily R. Meredith, a resident of Bannack's Yankee Flat, wrote of the dark side of life there. "I don't know how many deaths have occurred this winter, but that there have not been twice as many is entirely owing to the fact that drunken men do not shoot well. There are times when it is really unsafe to go through the main street on the other side of the creek, the bullets whizz around so, and no one thinks of punishing a man for shooting another. What do you think of a place where men openly walk the streets with shotguns, waiting to shoot someone against whom they have a grudge, and no one attempt to prevent it?"

Plummer had gone west at an early age and had been successful in Nevada City, California, as a baker, selling his two bakeries for a profit. In 1856 Plummer was elected marshal of Nevada City. He was so popular that the Democrats eventually decided to have him run as a candidate for state legislature. However, by doing his job, Plummer had made an enemy of the very rich leader of the Know-Nothing party, Squire Williams. The man's self-important son, Wallace, had accidentally killed a sheriff, and Plummer had disgraced the son for life. The Know-Nothings printed flyers which claimed Plummer was the agent of a large foreign consortium which was trying to steal all the mines in the area. It even accused him of being for early spring rain which would have been a problem for river miners. The allegations in the flyer had crushed Plummer's political chances and also crushed Plummer's chances with a young lady who had promised to marry him.

Soon after his political defeat Plummer ran into real trouble. John Vedder was a drunken wife beater who rented a house from Plummer in Nevada City. Plummer, who had less room at his new residence, had arranged to leave some of his things in the house, and so had contact with the Vedders. Outraged at Vedder's treatment of his wife, Plummer warned Vedder that he should make sure he had a court order before taking custody of their daughter. Vedder began threatening to kill Plummer. Plummer, concerned about Mrs. Vedder, tried to move her to safer quarters away from her husband. As Mrs. Vedder was packing, Vedder came in through the kitchen with a gun in hand. Plummer shot and killed him.

All male juries of the time could not conceive that any man would protect a woman he had not had relations with. Plummer had never been seen with Mrs. Vedder nor had he had time to have an affair with her. Yet, the bad feelings generated by the accusations in the Know-Nothings flyer followed him. A jury sentenced Plummer to ten years in prison.

Plummer, however, was released from San Quentin after six months. His friends, prison guards, and doctor, fearing that Plummer would die of consumption in prison, petitioned Governor John Weller and Plummer was pardoned.

Plummer, once out, began drinking heavily and associating with the sordid element in Nevada City. When gambler John Riley stabbed Plummer in the head in a bar, the wounded Plummer shot him in self-defense. His friends in the sheriff's department, knowing his parole would be revoked, and knowing he hadn't deserved his first sentence, left the jail open one night and Plummer walked away.

Just before arriving in Bannack, Plummer had spent the fall at Sun River Farm, 160 miles north of Bannack. There he'd met the pretty, chestnut-haired Electa Bryan. Plummer proposed, and although he won Electa, he made an enemy. Jack Cleveland, a rough who'd traveled with Plummer from California, had also fallen for Electa. When Plummer left Sun River Farm, the angry Cleveland journeyed with Plummer to Bannack.

One morning in February or early March of 1863, Cleveland came into Goodrich's Saloon in Bannack where Plummer, who had taken refuge from the cold, was talking to friends. Cleveland was already drunk and began to bother a young man, Jeff Perkins, about a debt. Jeff Perkins insisted he had paid it. When Perkins left, Cleveland started making comments about Plummer. Cleveland had been threatening Plummer publicly for some time saying, "I known him from the other side," and that Plummer was his "meat." Plummer, who usually tried to settle disputes peacefully, had avoided trouble. This time, however, Plummer stood and said he'd had enough. Cleve-land went for his gun. Cleveland's first shot went wild, as did Plum-mer's, but before Cleveland could fire again Plummer shot him in the groin. Cleveland fell. Cleveland asked if he'd shoot a

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man when he was down. Plummer said no. As Cleveland came up with his gun Plummer fired three more shots one of which mortally wounded Cleveland through the eye.

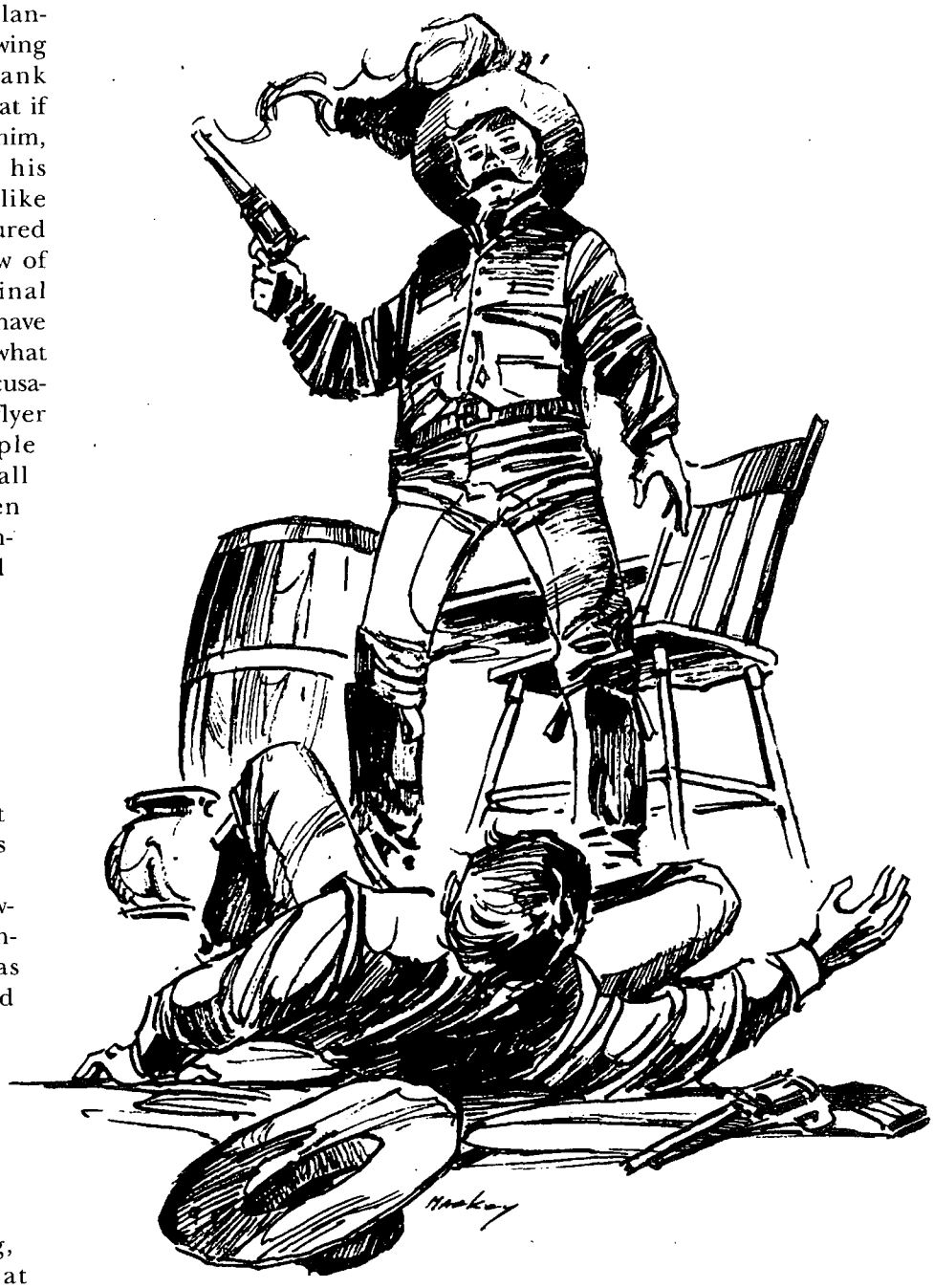
Although other versions of the fight were later published that claimed Cleveland had never gone for his gun, eyewitnesses who testified at Plummer's trial, including the fellow who was getting a shave in the barber chair during the fight, cleared Plummer.

The killing caused problems with a local butcher, Hank Crawford, who came to ask Plummer about the whereabouts of Cleveland's blankets. Plummer insisted on knowing what Cleveland had told Hank Crawford. He told Crawford that if Cleveland said anything about him, Plummer would kill him in his death bed. Vigilante writers like Arthur Dimsdale have conjectured it was because Cleveland knew of Plummer's history and criminal plans. However, Plummer may have had just reason to be wary of what Cleveland said after what the accusations in the Know-Nothings' flyer had done to him. With people coming into Bannack from all over, his past would have been hard to keep quiet. Since Plummer feared a dying Cleveland more than a living one, one has to consider what might have occurred to Plummer in prison. Plummer was so handsome that one youngster in Bannack described him as looking feminine. What possibly frightened Plummer was that Cleveland might talk about his personal past in prison.

During Plummer's trial Crawford was elected sheriff of Bannack. Though Plummer was acquitted, Crawford had sold Plummer's guns to cover expenses. When the miner's court forced Crawford to buy them back out of his own pocket, an ongoing animosity grew between the two men. It ended when Crawford came around the side of a building, gun in hand, and shot at Plummer's back. The bullet entered Plummer's right arm at the elbow and lodged in his wrist. Failing to kill Plummer, Crawford fled back home to Wisconsin.

Despite his trial and conflict with Crawford, Plummer was very popular. He knew a great deal about mining, and his gold claims and partnerships brought in as much as $3,800 a day. Yet, longing for the public respect he had achieved in Nevada City, California, as marshal, he ran for sheriff of Bannack. Unlike the element that hung out in the saloons all day, Plummer was a

Cleveland fell. Cleveland asked if he'd shoot a man when he was down. Plummer said no. As Cleveland came up with his gun Plummer fired three more shots one of which mortally wounded Cleveland through the eye.



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workaholic and a shrewd businessman. He set up the first stamp mill, and when gold was discovered in Adler Gulch, Plummer also staked claims there. To check on the people who worked his mines for him he had to cover hundreds of miles each week. When he went back to Sun River to claim Electa as his bride, he was the newly elected sheriff as well as successful miner.

Unfortunately, Electa stayed with Plummer only three months before going back East. There are no records to explain why. Her sister, Martha Vail, had moved to town, so the loneliness she must have felt in the small log home was at least partly relieved. It is possible she was pregnant and didn't want a child born in the western wilderness, but no real proof of a child has been found. Though many have since speculated that Electa left Henry because she found out about his crimes, Electa, in fact, suspected a conspiracy for years after Plummer's death. The widow was eventually visited by vigilantes, and she kept silent.

When she left, Plummer followed along after Electa's wagon for three days, like a young lover. The fact that the small, grey-eyed Electa rarely left the wagon might indicate a complicated pregnancy. In any case, they were never to see each other again.

It was on this trip that Plummer first met Sidney Edgerton and his family. Edgerton was a politically hungry man who had come to the Idaho Territory after political failure in his native Ohio. He'd been appointed justice of Idaho Territory but never bothered to go to Lewiston to be sworn in. Edgerton's family was quite impressed with Plummer, who seemed affable. It was no surprise to them that he was the most liked man in the territory. Edgerton knew he, Edgerton, would not be as popular. He was an intellectual elitist, of higher station than the miners in the territory. A democratic form of government that elected representatives on popular-

In Horse Prairie three masked men approached Tilden, searched him, and finding nothing of value, let him go.

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ity was not something Edgerton could afford. Not a naive politician, it is unlikely he would not have known about any potential political opponents before entering the territory. After meeting Plummer, the Edgertons very conveniently met a wagon master who knew Plummer's history. Edgerton quickly began passing on a sinister version of Plummer's past, laying the groundwork he knew he'd need to gain political power.

Edgerton's political maneuvering was aided by the fact that some of Plummer's deputies were roughs. Plummer, as busy as he was, was spread out between Bannack and the new Adler Gulch towns of Virginia City and Nevada City, seventy miles away. As the deputy job paid little, Plummer had to take whomever he could get. This led to problems. Deputy Buck Stinson, for example, who was lynched with Plummer in Bannack, had been one of three Plummer deputies banished from Virginia City for shooting Deputy J.W. Dillingham. Plummer had to retain Stinson, as few people wanted to do anything but dig for gold.

Where there are millions of dollars in gold there is bound to be crime. The only regular stage line ran from Virginia City and Nevada City (two miles apart) to Bannack. And there were plenty of gulches for robbers to hide in. Dimsdale, a vigilante himself, claimed in his book *The Vigilantes of Montana,* knowledge of 102 murder victims, some of whose bodies were never found. How Dimsdale could claim that all were robbed and murdered when the bodies had never been found, and that they were killed by road agents rather than attacked by Indians or had simply left the territory, no one can know. Edgerton and nephew Sanders built the rumor that the robberies were the work of a highly organized road agent gang. Every robbery, including one by two thieves who were so inept as to be heard talking by an oncoming stage driver, were attributed to this organized gang.

While Plummer was sheriff the total take of robberies in the area was small.

Despite vigilante claims that crime decreased after the execution of Plummer and his gang, crime actually increased significantly. Soon after the vigilantes had executed their twenty-one known road agents, a shipment of gold to Salt Lake City was robbed of $27,000. This was more than any robbery had netted during Plummer's reign as sheriff.

Edgerton and Sanders' rumors took hold and some business leaders in Virginia City began to distrust the sheriff. It was in November of 1863 when Sanders and Edgerton pulled off the crucial act in their political play. Plummer was going out to round up horses, a regular part of his job. Edgerton insisted he was off to find new claims. Plummer invited Sanders, Edgerton's go-between, to come along if he didn't believe him. Sanders followed Plummer out of town. While Plum-mer was gone, Edgerton sent his young fourteen-year-old ward, Henry Tilden, out to Horse Prairie Hill (in the opposite direction from the road Plummer took), supposedly to round up some stray cows. According to Jon Hoerning of Bannack State Park, November was an unlikely time to send the boy out looking for cows in Horse Prairie, fourteen miles away.

In Horse Prairie three masked men ap-proached Tilden, searched him, and finding nothing of value, let him go. Tilden ran back to Edger-ton and announced that one of the men was Henry Plummer. The distraught boy identified Plummer only by the red lining of his coat, and a new gun. Edgerton told the boy to keep the information secret.

In December, when the frozen body of a well-liked young man, Nick Tibolt, was found, the entire community was outraged. Although the killer was actually Alex Carter, a posse rounded up George Ives. Ives had a trial which Sanders prosecuted. When the jury could not reach a unanimous decision, Sanders demanded a voice vote. The mob hung Ives. Knowing the time was right to grab power and take control, Sanders quickly organized a committee of vigilantes.

The vigilance committee began rounding up known or suspected criminals and administering swift justice. However, the list of suspects quickly grew to include anyone the officers of the committee bore grudges against. When bartender Red Yeager was arrested as a road agent, the vigilantes claimed he gave them Plummer's name as the ring leader of the outlaws. It's more likely that Yeager, knowing that the man who had given the posse George Ives' name had been freed, told them whatever they wanted to hear, or that Yeager was hung to keep him from revealing he'd named no one or been told who to name. No copy of Yeager's alleged list in existence today has the same road agents' names on it.

When the vigilantes declared Plummer as the ring leader of an organized group of thieves, many found it hard to believe. So, just before the Bannack lynching, Edgerton and Sanders produced young Henry Tilden with his tale of being robbed by Henry Plummer.

After Plummer's hanging Edgerton became the first governor of newly established Montana Territory. He swiftly became unpopular and retired back to Ohio. The few people foolish enough to accuse the vigilantes of hanging innocent men were themselves hanged. Wilbur Sanders, as editor of the territory's first newspaper, and later as first president of the Montana Historical Society, made sure only the vigilantes' side of the story reached print. No one knows what became of Plummer's rich mine holdings as the vigilantes confiscated property without any accounting. However, the year after Plummer was hanged, Wilbur Sanders, later to become Montana's first United States senator, built himself the finest house in the territory.

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BOOKMART

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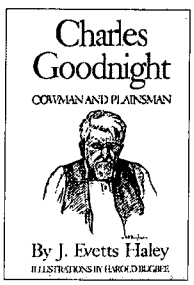

489—CHARLES GOODNIGHT: COWMAN AND PLAINSMAN. *By J. Evetts Haley.* A veteran of the Texas plains by the age of thirteen, Goodnight launched into the cattle business at twenty, guiding the Texas Rangers at twenty-four, blazing cattle trails nearly two thousand miles beyond the frontier at forty, and at forty-five dominating nearly two million acres of range country in the interests of order. Even at the age of ninety he was an international authority on the range industry. Haley provides a fully readable and important biography, vividly told, thrilling, and completely authentic. 485p. University of Oklahoma Press. **Paper, $18.95**

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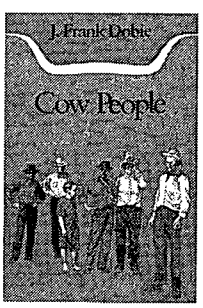

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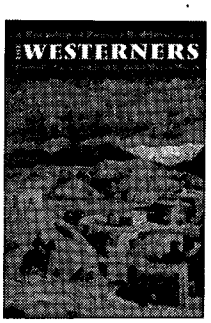

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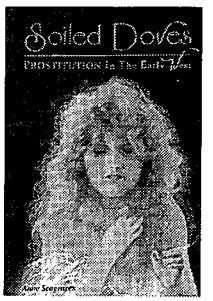

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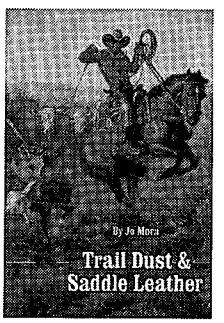

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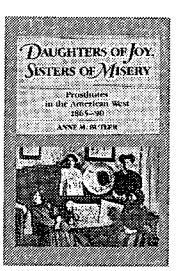

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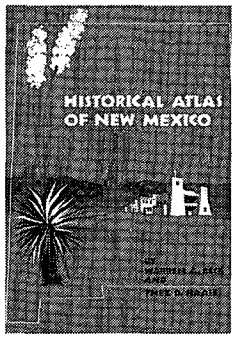

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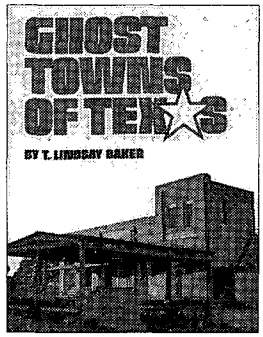

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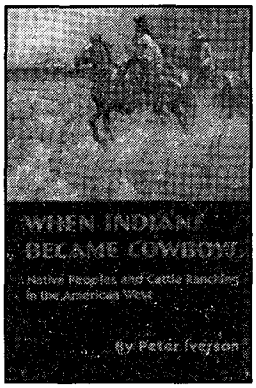

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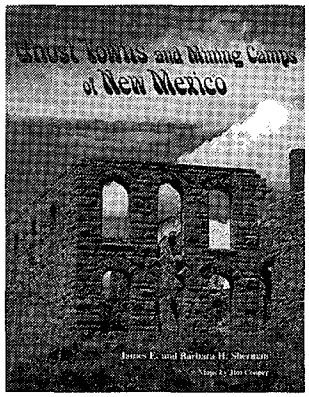

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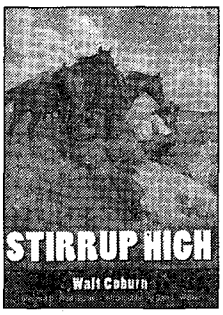

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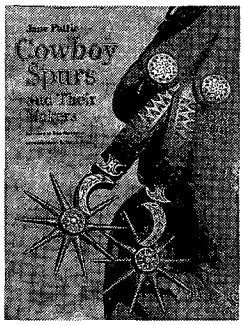

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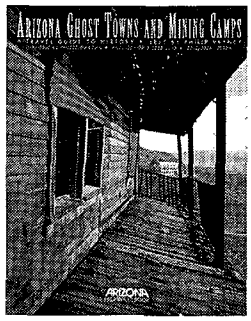

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Reconstruction Outlaw

Cullen Montgomery Baker, Reconstruction Desperado, by Barry A. Crouch and Donaly E. Brice. (Louisiana State University Press, P.O. 25053, Baton Rouge, LA 70893. 186 pp. Three maps, seven photos, essay on sources, index. $34.95 cloth.)

Most outlaw-lawman enthusiasts draw a blank when the name of Cullen Baker comes up. We can recite with considerable accuracy the milestones in Jesse James' criminal career or the notches on Billy Bonney's firearms. But Baker's name generally evokes some vague image of a Texas Reconstruction guerrilla, battling the evil Union army terrorizing innocent settlers. Alas, that is but another product of bad history and bad writers.

In truth, Baker was a drunken, murdering psychopath. So conclude Crouch and Brice, and they punctuate that conclusion with an exhaustive examination of all that has been written about Baker, further supported by little known contemporary documentation found in the National Archives and the Texas State Library, where Brice is an archivist. While chronicling events of 130 years ago is not easy under the best circumstances, the authors have diligently sought out and compared all available information. As a result, they are equipped to take a stab at defining what made Baker tick: "a killer (mostly of defenseless or unsuspecting individuals), a liar, a thief, a deserter, a drunk, and, in general, a derelict."

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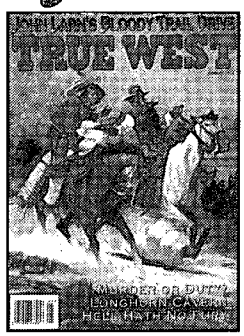

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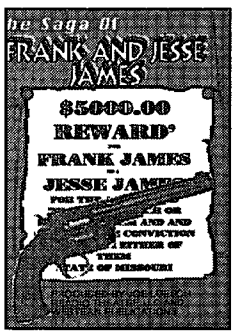

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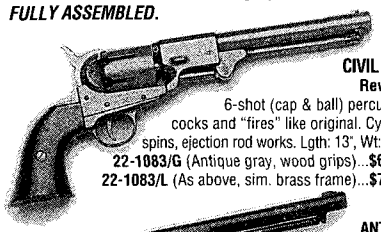

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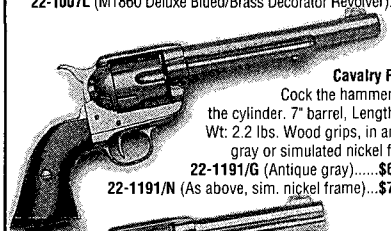

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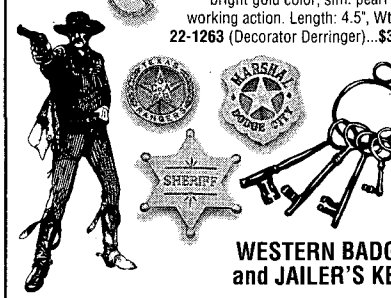

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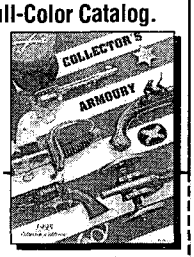

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Baker is conservatively thought to have killed at least fifteen men, black and white, as he waged an ill-defined, irrational war on Union soldiers, agents of the Freedman's Bureau, freed slaves, and personal acquaintances who got in his way. The figure could well be higher, but information is insufficient. Crouch and Brice clearly establish that Baker was not a "social bandit," nor some noble knight defending the vestiges of an antebellum southern way of life after the fall of the confederacy. Indeed, it was local fear of the man that led to a planned assassination after the army had failed to chase him down.

The authors are careful to present all competing views on the various events in Baker's life, putting them in context with established facts. Some authors do not fare too well in the analysis, their efforts clearly a product of overactive imaginations without a full grasp of the facts. In addition, they explore the myths that have evolved around Baker, leading to the distorted picture that his name evokes.

The carefully annotated book (footnotes at the bottom of the page, yet) provides not only the sources consulted, but also mentions other works that might give the reader a broader background on the particular area under discussion. My favorite was a footnote derived from a description of Baker being knocked senseless in a saloon brawl; for background the reader is referred to a legitimate historical article, "Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry." Now that's research!

At least, Baker has a definitive biography that allows the reader to gain a more accurate perspective and make independent conclusions, and likely this will be the book most relied on by future historians. There is no traditional bibliography, the authors opting for an "essay on sources," an analysis of each of the major writings on Baker. As a matter of taste, I would prefer a traditional listing of sources, if only for the convenience of locating a full cite of a source rather than having to search through footnotes. However, that is a small problem and does not detract from the value of the book. For those who prefer documented gunfighter lore, as opposed to much of the commercial tripe that has too often passed for history, this will be a welcome addition to your collection.—*Rick Miller, Harker Heights, Texas.*

Wyoming Executions

You Are Respectfully Invited to Attend My Execution, by Larry K. Brown. (High Plains Press, 539 Cassa Road, Glendo, Wyoming 82213. 187 pages, illustrated. $11.95 paper.)

Not one of the subjects of Larry K. Brown's book is here to read it. All were put to death long ago. Brown, the author of *Hog Ranches of Wyoming*, is familiar with the dark side of the frontier history in the northern Rockies. In *Execution* he turns his attention to the stories of the seven men who were legally executed—all by hanging and all for murder—during Wyoming's territorial period, 1868 to 1890. (Curiously, statehood didn't seem to have improved law enforcement: from 1892 to 1903, a period half as long, thirty-three men and one woman were lynched by mobs.)

John Boyer, the first man legally hanged in the territory, was convicted in 1871 of murdering two men who had bound, gagged, and raped his mother and sister. He should have sued his lawyer for malpractice.

John Leroy Donovan, sentenced to die for bludgeoning to death the popular barber of Rock Springs, lost his life but not his sense of humor: asked if the noose was too tight, he said, "It is as tight as it can be without choking me." Another murderer, George Black, had no fear of indigestion. He ate a last breakfast of fried chicken and oysters.

A sad story is that of George Cooke. After drinking countless beers and a quart of gin and whisky, he shot his brother-in-law. But alco-

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hol was no defense. He went to the gallows. Not too surprisingly, most of the condemned prisoners attempted to escape. Those that succeeded were all recaptured. The stories are well-illustrated and each closes with a note on pertinent court and newspaper records.

Brown's writing is occasionally marred by breezy slang: "the twenty-three-year old Romeo like to tip a brew and pay for a poke with the girls who worked there." In other words, he liked to drink beer and frequent prostitutes.

Finally, it would have been useful to have these seven stories in a context. For example, how many of the men (and women—Wyoming was an equal opportunity territory) arrested for murder during the period in question were acquitted and how many were sentenced to die? Nonetheless, as in his earlier book, Brown has opened another window on frontier life, and he has shown that there is plenty of Wyoming history left to be written if only we take the trouble, as he did, to go to the sources.—*Dan Buck, Washington, DC.*

Texas Rogue

My Confession, by Samuel Chamberlain. (Texas State Historical Association, 2/306 Richardson Hall, University Station, Austin, Texas 78712-1104. 383 pp. $60.00 cloth.)

Terrific! That's the only adequate adjective for this fine book, a publishing tour de force. It is a classic of Americana. The price may seem a bit steep at sixty bucks ($51.00 if you join the association first), but it is an oversized volume and its pages of heavily coated paper permit excellent reproduction of the author's 160 watercolors.

The subtitle is *Recollections of a Rogue* and it is a picaresque tale—that is, the adventure of a protagonist who is something like an anti-hero of today. (Picaro in Spanish means "rogue.") But Chamberlain was a rather charming rascal or scalawag, not a real villain. A Baptist Bostonian who left the straight and narrow at age sixteen, he became a compulsive boozer, seducer, gambler, and liar, but was also a courageous dragoon in the Mexican War.

The book contains his racy reminiscences of the war and its aftermath. He may or may not have actually run with John Glanton and his scalp-hunters, but he fills us in on these notorious fellows. A natural writer and pretty good amateur combat artist, Chamberlain was, alas, "world class" when it came to exaggeration and fibs about his career. For example, he wrote of participating in the Battle of Monterrey, yet was no closer than San Antonio. But he did fight in the crucial Battle of Buena Vista.

We now have for the first time the complete, unabridged text of Sam's manuscript. An abridged version was published in 1956 and became a sort of bestseller, thanks in part to *Life* magazine printing excerpts. Even better, the reminiscence is now splendidly edited and annotated by Pulitzer Prize-winning historian William Goetzmann, who sorts out the truth from Sam's occasional flights of fancy.

My Confession is, without a doubt, the most informative and fascinating (if sometimes melodramatic) personal account of the Mexican War. It was no comic opera affair. The Mexican Army put up a good fight, and both sides were very brutal.

Hardly an angel himself, Chamberlain was bothered by the excessive brutality of the Texas Rangers and some of the undisciplined volunteers, as opposed to his own regulars, toward civilians. The American army was loaded with drunks, cowards and incompetents, officers as well as enlisted men. But it was a campaign which propelled the United States into Manifest Destiny and added a Far West to Texas and the Louisiana Purchase.—*Richard Dillon, Mill Valley, California.*

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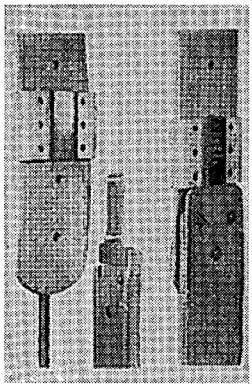

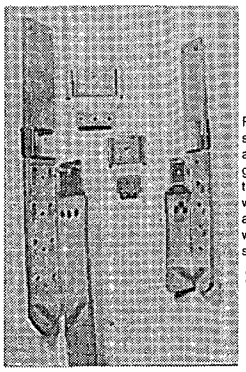

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Bill Power, Bob and Grat Dalton, and Dick Broadwell after their disastrous double-bank robbery attempt in Coffeyville, Kansas, October 5, 1882.

THE DALTON'S DAY

In the book *Age of the Gunfghter,* by Joseph G. Rosa, is a photograph of four members of the Dalton gang in death. The caption reads: "Three of the brothers and Dick Broadwell lie dead and handcuffed outside the Coffeyville jail on 5 October 1882. Their attempt to rob two banks at once failed." Our question, from sharp-eyed reader Don McGuire, Saint John, Canada, is, "I am no expert on the Old West but I believe only two Daltons died that day. Could you identify the fourth?"

The photograph in question is quite famous, showing the four dead outlaws laid out on a wagon bed, parts of their clothing already cut away as grisly souvenirs. The caption is in error. It should read: Bill Power, Bob Dalton, Grat Dalton, and Dick Broadwell. With several hundred photographs in this large pictorial book we can forgive Joe Rosa for an error in a picture caption. I am sure he knew better when preparing the text.

And why would anyone handcuff a dead man? My theory is that it was for the sake of the photographer. Several pictures of the dead men were taken that day, and with the cuffs on, their arms would not flop about!

What Seeger Saw...

Craig Shockley contacted us via email about an article which was published back in the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s, on the so-called "Gunfight at the O.K. Corral" in which a certain Bert Seeger was mentioned either as a witness or a participant. Can we provide a copy of that article?

Well, I checked all my Wyatt Earp-Tombstone-O.K. Corral books (a library which admittedly is not 100 percent complete) and found no name of Seeger or any name closely resembling it. Thus, I have my doubts. Possibly the man was a witness or participant in some other gunfight and not the Tombstone one? I am sure our readers can help out with this one.

Sitler's Dodge

Henry Laughlin Sitler is not a household word, but he played a role in Dodge City's history. A letter from D. Frederick Dyck, Mineral Point, Missouri, inquires about Sitler. Mr. Dyck believes H. Sitler was the brother of his maternal great-great grandfather, George Francis Sitler. He has found some information on Sitler in the book *Dodge City—Up Through a Century in Story and Pictures* by Frederic R. Young and is hoping to locate additional information.

Sitler and his brothers all served in the Union Army during the Civil War. Sitler himself reportedly built

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the first structure on the site which became Dodge City, a three-room sod house built in 1871. At first he planned to supply wood to Fort Dodge but decided that ranching would be a more prosperous business. While ranching he also began a brickyard. Some buildings in Dodge feature bricks with the initials H.L.S. On August 15, 1872, he and six others chartered the Dodge City Town Company of Ford County for the purpose of creating the town of Dodge.

On July 21, 1884, "Mysterious Dave" Mather shot and killed Assistant Marshal Tom Nixon in Dodge. Mather's trial began on December 29. One of the witnesses called was H.L. Sitler. Strangely, Sitler, who had been subpoenaed, did not appear. Along with several others who did not appear, his arrest was ordered. Not only was Sitler a "no-show" witness, but the famed Bill Tilghman was as well. The outcome of these highly respectable citizens who failed to appear is not known.

An interesting matter related to Sitler is a well-known photograph of a man standing in the doorway of a sod house in Dodge, identified as one Tom Nixon. In Young's *Dodge City* this man is identified as Henry L. Sitler. Sitler was born August 24, 1837, in Cranford County, Pennsylvania, and died October 31, 1917, in Dodge City.

Those Horrible Horrells

Norman Lambert, Nashville, Michigan, who has "been a reader of these old rags for many years" wants to know about Pink Higgins and the Horrell brothers.

Higgins was born John Calhoun Pinckney Higgins in 1848 in Georgia. The family relocated in Texas and established a ranch in Lampasas County, Texas, as early as 1857. He was reportedly a leader in the Ku Klux Klan for a time, owned and operated a meat market and saloon until they burned, and fought hostile Indians. He was also stocking cattle herds for sale on the the Kansas markets.

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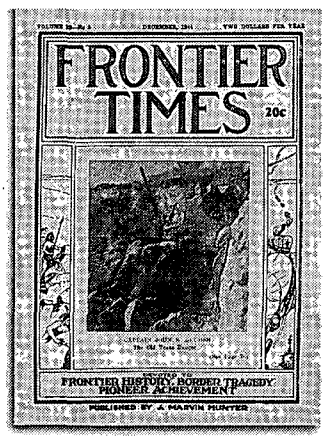

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A 1927 photo of Samuel M. Horrell, and

About 1873-74 he and the Horrell brothers started their feuding, probably when the Horrells were suspected of branding Higgins' cattle. Bill O'Neal, however, in his *Encyclopedia of Western Gunfighters*, wrote that one of the four policemen killed by the Horrells in the Lampasas "State Police Massacre" in 1873 was a son-in-law of Higgins.

No doubt, like most feuds, there was more than one reason for the hatred and violence between the Higgins followers and the Horrells. The feud between the families cost the lives of several men: Zeke Terrell, Carson Graham, Ike Lantier, Merritt Horrell, and Frank Mitchell. Of course, several others were wounded during the feud. The Texas Rangers eventually ended the feud with the arrest of the main participants, causing them to sign a treaty of peace, promising to end all hostilities. For the most part the feud did end with the influence of the Rangers.

The Horrells were sons of Samuel Horrell, Sr., who had migrated from Arkansas to Lampasas County before the Civil War. The father died before 1865, but his boys had been raised to be tough, clannish, and adept with guns. They were John, Ben, Mart, Tom, Sam,

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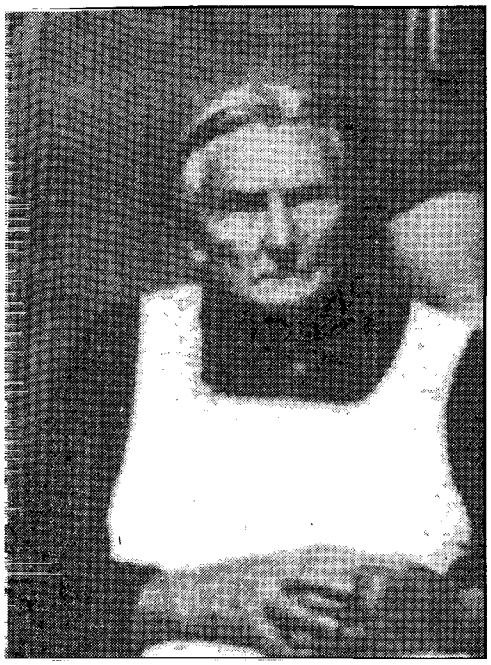

Author's collection

wife Martha.

and Merritt. John Horrell was the first to go to New Mexico and was killed in a gunfight near Las Cruces. In 1873 the clan moved to Lincoln County, New Mexico, where they brought violence into the community in a series of battles called the Horrell War, preceding the Lincoln County War. Ben Horrell and two others were killed in Lincoln. When Lincoln got too hot for them they moved back to Lampasas County and feuded with the Higgins clan. When a Bosque County merchant was murdered in a robbery, the Horrells were suspected. Mart and Tom were arrested on suspicion and on December 15, 1878, a mob broke into the jail and shot the pair to death. On January 22, 1877, Merritt Horrell was shot and killed by Pink Higgins in a Lampasas saloon. Sam Horrell managed to avoid a violent end and lived quietly in California, dying August 3, 1936, in Eureka, California, at an advanced age. It is a pity that he never told his story.

If you have a question, send it to Chuck Parsons, Western Publications, P.O. Box 2107, Stillwater, OK 74076. Please keep questions brief. Sign your full name and address, including zip code. Names will be published if question is used. Space limitations may not permit us to use all questions. Due to the volume of mail, we cannot forward correspondence to people whose questions appear in "Answer Man."

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MARSHALL MURDOCK: Editor of the Plains

By Annette Wood

Kansas had achieved statehood a mere eleven years earlier and the Civil War had been over for less than ten years. Settlers poured into western towns and onto homesteads in covered wagons pulled by teams of horses.

Wichita, Kansas, boasted a population of less than one thousand. Horseless cars were not yet dreamed of in prairie towns and sidewalks were still made from plank and cinders.

Into this environment newspaperman Marshall Murdock brought his printing press. His principal equipment was a flat-bed press he transported from a neighboring town. He ground out his first issue of four pages, starting from scratch in a place where several other weeklies had already expired.

Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

Marshall Murdock, around the time he founded Wichita's

The *Eagle* was born on April 12, 1872, only two years after the city was incorporated. Murdock printed more copies on the first day it appeared than had any other fledgling Kansas paper. From the beginning he dreamed of a circulation of five thousand. And from its first year the *Eagle* averaged one copy to every fourteen residents of Wichita.

Not only the *Eagle,* but also Wichita and Kansas grew rapidly. From 1881 to 1897, 203,000 people settled in the state. By 1889 Wichita's population had increased to 48,000. Money poured in from investors in Boston, New York, and San Francisco. Real estate offices stayed open around the clock. Six railroads were built, as well as six colleges and universities.

Marshall Murdock, as editor of the *Eagle,* was credited for much of the city's extraordinary growth. His punchy editorials attracted attention from all over the country. People settled in Wichita as a result. Without this man's influence, the paper and thus the surrounding city and state would have developed very differently.

Marshall Murdock was born in Virginia on October 15, 1837. His father was Thomas Murdock and his mother Catherine Pierpoint. The family moved to Ohio when Marshall was eight. The father was first a contractor and later engaged in the iron business and merchandising .

Murdock received most of his

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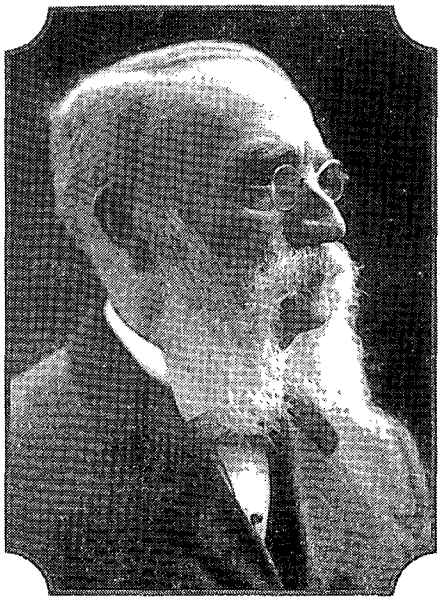

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Marshall Murdock later in life.

His principal equipment was a flat-bed press he transported from a neighboring town. He ground out his first issue of four pages, starting from scratch in a place where several other weeklies had already expired.

education in Ironton, Ohio. This is where he learned the art of printing. He started to college at the state university in Delaware, Ohio. Then in the summer of 1856, his father failed in business. The family moved to Topeka, Kansas.

Known as "Bleeding Kansas" during this pre-Civil War period, the then territory basked in turmoil. Murdock, along with a half dozen or so others, participated in cutting ice over the Kaw River for John Brown. Brown, with a wagonload of escaped slaves, was making a last trip north.

Murdock also managed to visit the Pike's Peak gold mines with his brother before he returned to look after his family when the Civil War broke out. His father and two brothers went to war.

In April of 1863 Murdock married Victoria Mayberry. He established the *Chronicle* in Burlingame that same year. Nine years later he arrived in Wichita to start the *Eagle*. He was still only thirty-four. His brother and the paper's business manager, Roland, was twenty-five.

A master of prose, especially known for his slogans and titles, Murdock gained fame for his vivid descriptions. He possessed frank and decisive opinions on every issue and shared them freely with his readers. Editors of the papers in the area imitated him with little success.

"His personality was felt in every department and sensed by the reader," stated an *Eagle* article on October 3, 1920, a number of years after Murdock's death.

In the late 1880s, Wichita experienced a tremendous boom. Murdock's prose almost certainly led to much of this growth. "A copy of the *Eagle* posted in the Counting room of every daily in Kansas," wrote the editor of the Atchison *Champion*, "would be a silent but potent instructor as to how a town is kept booming."

Then on February 24, 1887, Murdock published his famous "Call a Halt" editorial in which he warned the city of impending doom if the rapid growth did not stop. "We want again to say and if possible to impress our people with the fact that wild speculation is not business nor conducive of a healthy growth or permanency," he emphasized.

The crash did not come immediately, but by 1889 the city was beginning to struggle. By 1892 the population had decreased by more than half. Although Kansas was experiencing drought and crop failure, Murdock received blame for much of the city's misfortune.

Probably the crash would have come anyway. But as he obtained recognition for the city's growth, he also is remembered for his part in

In the January issue of *True West*:

That Masterson-McDonald Standoff. **By R.K. DeArment.** An 1896 confrontation between Bat Masterson and Texas Ranger Bill McDonald comes as a result of one of the most bizarre boxing promotions in ring history.

Endicott Peabody's Really Big Adventure. **By S.J. Reidhead.** Tombstone's Episcopal missionary "...doesn't flirt with the girls, ...doesn't drink behind the door and, when it comes to baseball, he's a daisy."

Nine Days to Columbus. **By Gerry Hawk.** Kidnapped from her ranch, Maud Hawk is forced to accompany Pancho Villa on his "raid" into the United States.

The Devious Outlaw Career of Bob Rogers. **By Ken Butler.** After evading conviction for every crime in the book, an Oklahoma outlaw makes one final stand against law and order.

Death on Pearl Street. **By Charles Strom.** Two of Parkerville, Kansas', most respected citizens fight like common ruffians over the rules of courting.

Quaker Lawman. **By Arthur Shoemaker.** Indian Territory Special Officer Ben Williams is told to "Make friends with the Indians, chase out the white buffalo hunters, and arrest as many horse thieves as you can find."

Look for the January issue of *True West* on the newsstand December 1.

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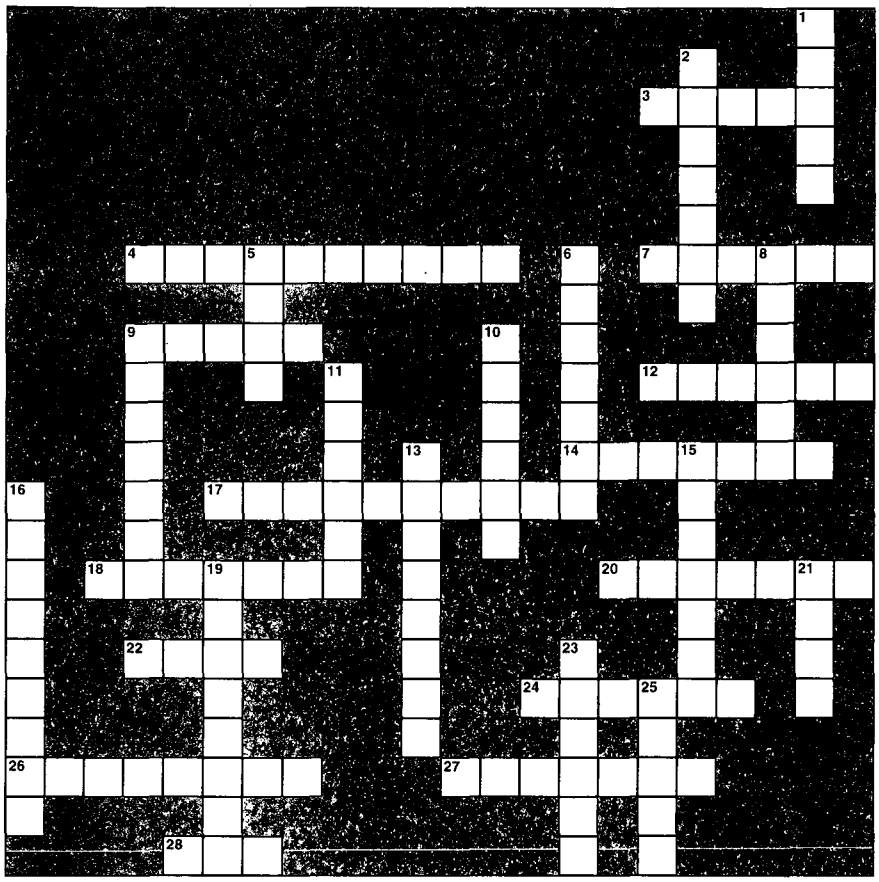
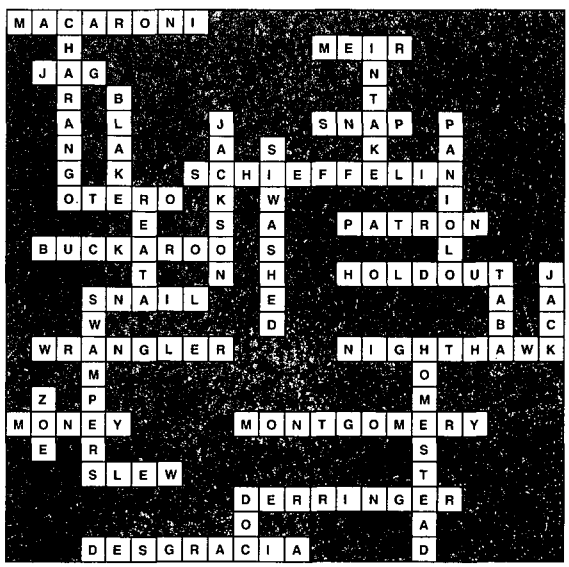


Across

3. Navaho lodge
4. Bull necked
7. Man on the dodge
9. To keep the pace
12. Vent shaft
14. Untrainable horse
17. Whip scorpion
18. Sagebrush
20. To haggle
22. Higgins
24. Fried beans
26. Skull cracker
27. John B. _____
28. Hobek, rode with Kilpatrick

Down

1. Spotted horse
2. Slave driver
5. The Bee that killed Bitter Creek
6. Uncoined gold
8. Water jug
9. Buffalo/cattle offspring
10. An Indian agent
11. Amigo
13. Shot in the stomach
15. Spanish nobleman
16. Canned goods
19. A blowdown
21. Hen fruit
23. Angry
25. Loggers' eating utensils



Solution in next month's True West.

Solution to last month's puzzle.

the city's economic misfortunes of the early 1890s.

Murdock had a few hitches in his support of progress. For years he was against a sewer because Wichita's "strong south wind could blow odors and disease germs toward Newton." And it was 1900 before he gave up on his crusade to keep women out of business and public life.

Overall, Murdock was recognized for his contributions. He supported many things that any new city needs—good business, peaceable streets, capable administrators, bridges, sidewalks, and sturdy brick buildings. He stood among the political and economic leaders of his time and place. Marsh died in 1908. According to his obituary in the *Topeka Capital*, "His usefulness in Kansas was as an honest and 'fighting' editor and town builder. No man wielded a more vigorous pen or spoke his views with more independence and recklessness of personal consequences."

He was survived by his wife, Victoria, and three children. Victoria Murdock took over the *Eagle* after her husband's death. Sons Marcellus and Victor were both involved with the newspaper at different times. For many years it remained a family-owned newspaper. Hill P. Wilson wrote of Marshall Murdock in *A Biographical History of Eminent Men in 1901 of the State of Kansas*:

> He is a town-builder par excellence, and the fine growth of Wichita was largely due to him and his paper. Possessed of a strong and pleasing literary style, an enormous capacity for journalistic work, and a disposition which plunged him into the thickest of everything, it is not singular that he has been able to build up a newspaper of wide circulation and great influence.
>
> It is impossible to know how much he changed the course of the plains with his press.

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